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PC GAMES

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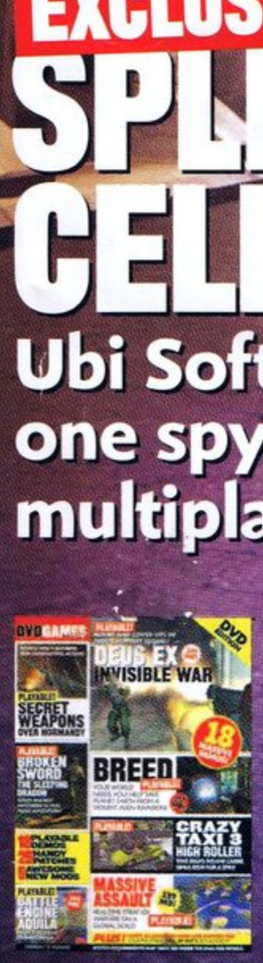
EXCLUSIVE!

SPLINTER CELL 2

Ubi Soft's number one spy goes multiplayer!



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FEBRUARY 2004
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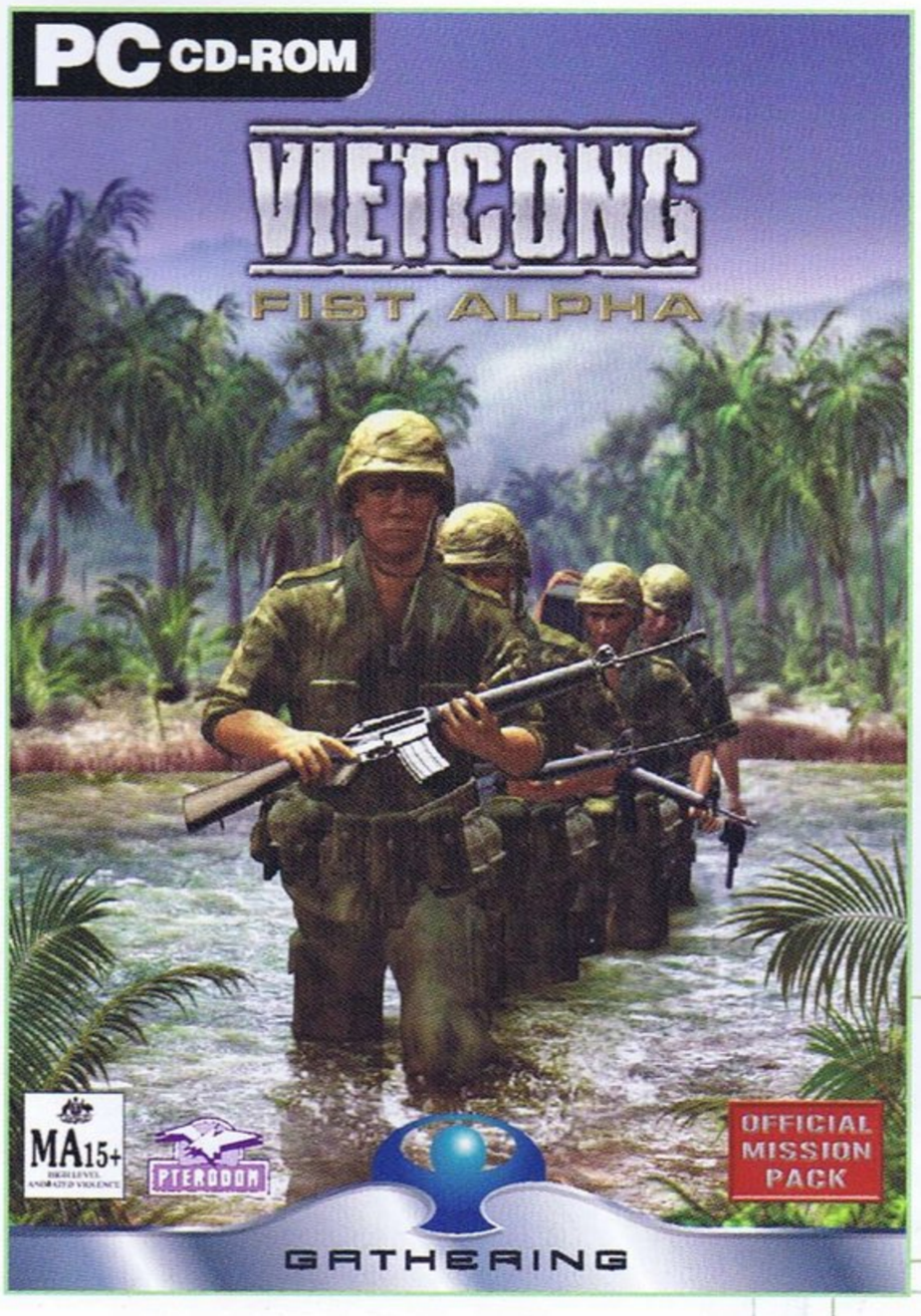

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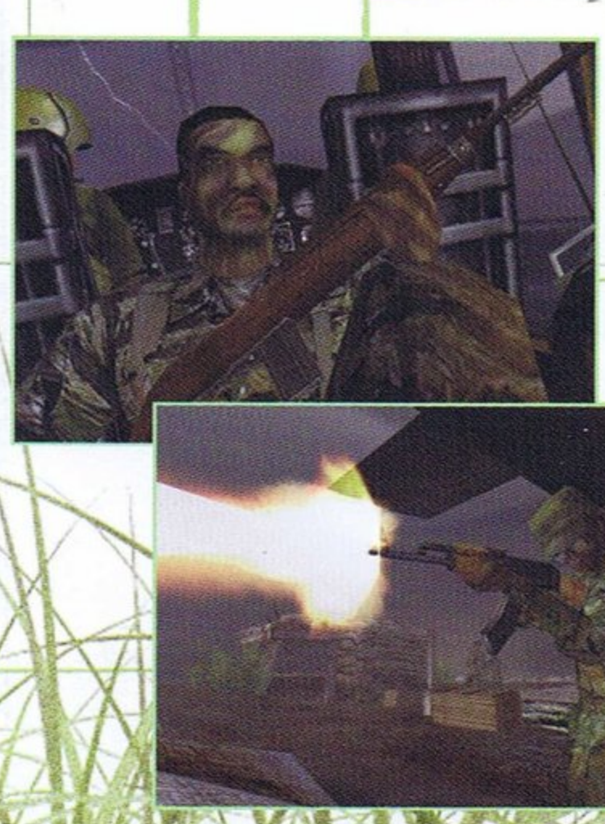

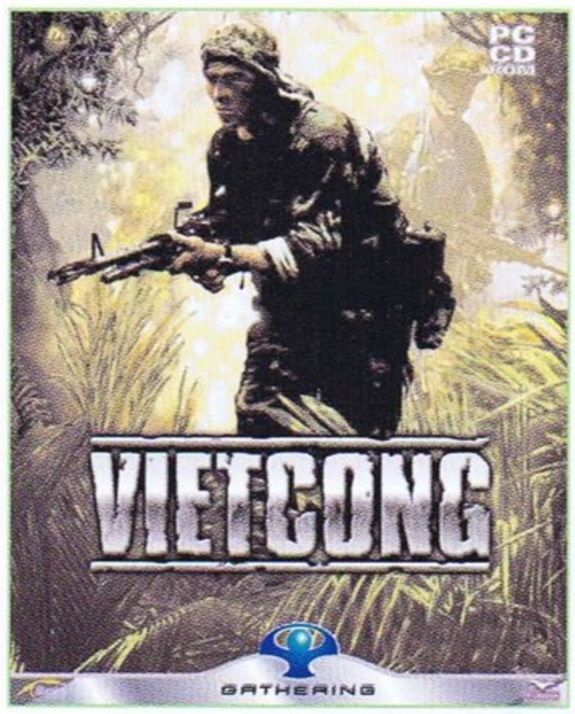

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VIETCONG

...and get ready for a world of pain.

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PC GAMES addict

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PC GAMES ADDICT, Derwent Howard Publishing
PO Box 1037, Bondi Junction, NSW 1355
Tel: (02) 9386 4666
Fax: (02) 9386 4288

Editorial
Editor Mark Donald
Editor-In-Chief Kevin Cheung
Production Editor Ed Lomas
Deputy Editor Ross Atherton
Disc Editor Harry Maragos
Art Editor Mark Wynne
Designer Claire Timpson
Designer Amanda Neal
Hardware Editor Jere Lawrence
Senior Writer Craig Pearson
Contributors Mark Sutherns, Tony Ellis, John Hicks, Simon Pickstock, Steven Willis, Tim Stone, John Walker, Richard Cobbett, Al Bickham, Jim Rossignol, Alec Meer, Mark Walbank, Jude Nicholas, Matt Pierce, Neil Hardman, Andy Lowe, Tom Mayo, Kieron Gillen, Chris Buxton

Photography In-house images taken with the Nikon Coolpix 995 & Nikon DX-1

Production
Production Manager Sue Wall

Advertising
Advertising Manager Joshua Hodge
josh@derwenthoward.com.au
Call: (02) 9386 4666

Publishing
Directors Jim Flynn, Nathan Berkley
Creative Director Jane Menon

Subscriptions
Call the Subscriptions Hotline on 136 116
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DERWENT HOWARD

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WELCOME TO AUSTRALIA'S BEST PC GAMES MAGAZINE

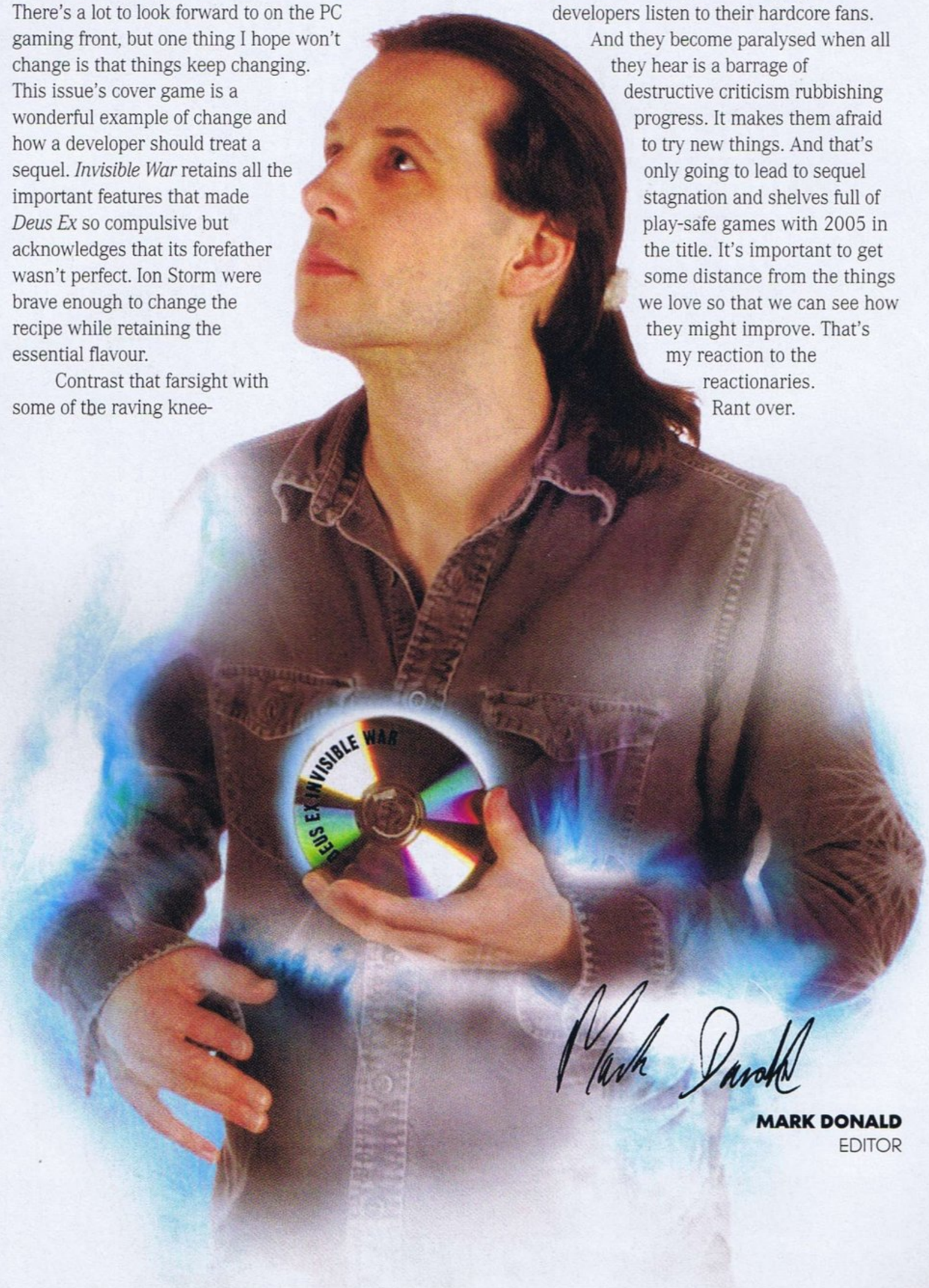
Spare some change?

As this issue of PC Games Addict hits newsstands across the country let's quickly look back and toast a fond farewell to good old 2003, before looking forward and wondering what exciting new games the remainder of 2004 will bring. Apart from *FIFA 2005*, obviously.

There's a lot to look forward to on the PC gaming front, but one thing I hope won't change is that things keep changing. This issue's cover game is a wonderful example of change and how a developer should treat a sequel. *Invisible War* retains all the important features that made *Deus Ex* so compulsive but acknowledges that its forefather wasn't perfect. Ion Storm were brave enough to change the recipe while retaining the essential flavour.

Contrast that farsight with some of the raving knee-jerkery found among elements of the game's online fanbase. These reactionaries are frightened by change. Because *Invisible War* isn't a cookie-cutter clone of a three year old game their world has fallen apart. It's a virulent problem. There's a faction in every fanbase who believe nothing is as good as it was, and this rabid nostalgia is damaging. Most developers listen to their hardcore fans. And they become paralysed when all they hear is a barrage of destructive criticism rubbishing progress. It makes them afraid to try new things. And that's only going to lead to sequel stagnation and shelves full of play-safe games with 2005 in the title. It's important to get some distance from the things we love so that we can see how they might improve. That's my reaction to the reactionaries.

Rant over.



Mark Donald

MARK DONALD
EDITOR

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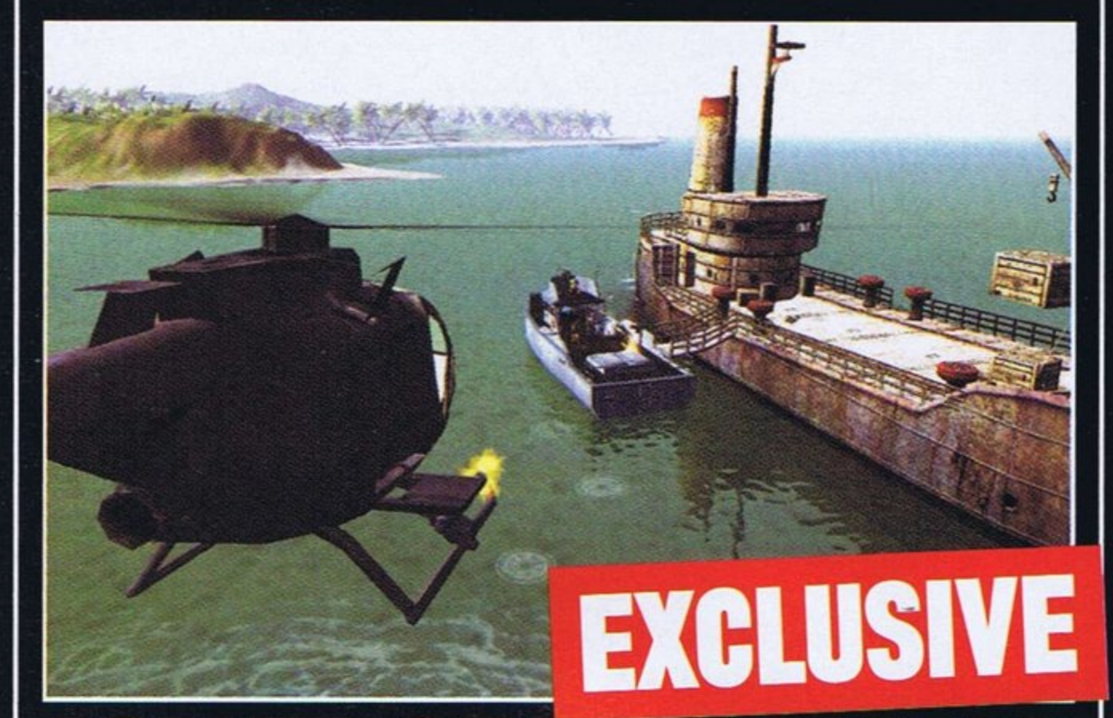

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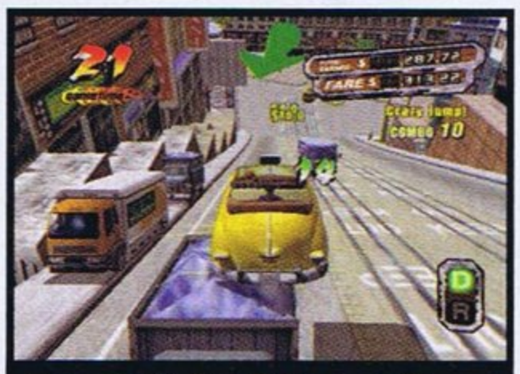

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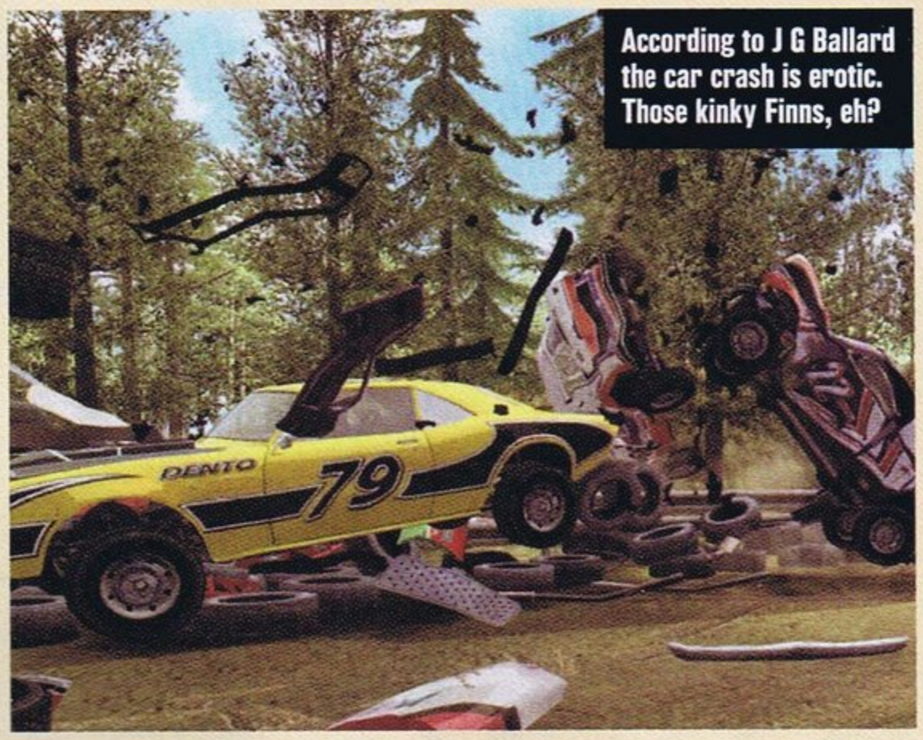
SCOOP! YOUR FIRST LOOK AT...

FLAT-OUT

Insanely destructive rally gaming, from the country that brought you The Moomins.

By MARK WALBANK



According to J G Ballard the car crash is erotic. Those kinky Finns, eh?

FOR a country of such raw beauty Finland is better known for an ugly statistic: it has the highest suicide rate in Scandinavia. Something to do with the short days and lack of whimsical comedy programmes. Not that we want to make light of this phenomenon, but you can't help thinking that some good PC games would do the nation a power of good.

That's where *Flat-Out* comes in, just one of the games being developed in a country that's fast emerging as a hotbed for programming talent. On the surface *Flat-Out* is yet another bumper-grinding rally effort, but underneath lurks a powerful game that could take the driving genre to a new level. Bugbear's director of business development, Aki Jarvilehto, describes it as "the *Half-Life 2* of racing games". This may appear very grand, but what he means is that almost every object in the world is dynamic, ensuring that every race is an unpredictable joyride of pleasure.

DEVELOPER PROFILE

BUGBEAR

Country Finland
Established 2000
www.bugbear.fi/flatout.htm

The team may be named after PC Games Addict's favourite D&D monster, but Bugbear's games have gone almost unnoticed outside eastern Europe. *Flat-Out*, however, seems destined to put the modest Finnish company on the map. After tinkering with impressive damage and crash physics in *Rough Trucks*, the team decided that a new more powerful engine was required for their latest game. Bugbear believe it's the most convincing, reactive system currently in development.

Previous Games:
Rough Trucks, Rally Trophy, Soldner

"CRASH YOUR VEHICLE INTO A LOW WALL AND SEND THE DRIVER OVER THE BONNET TO GET AS MUCH DISTANCE AS POSSIBLE..."

The physics engine has been built from the ground up, allowing Bugbear to create effects and a damage system that is completely integrated into the environment. This means every object, whether it be a vehicle's tyre or a wooden fence post, has a value and an impact within the game. "There are no invisible ropes guiding the player around the tracks," says Jarvilehto. If you drive into an object it will react convincingly, not only damaging your vehicle but potentially providing a mayhem-inducing obstruction on the track.

Flat-Out is already up and running, and while the AI is naturally weak at this stage, the sheer physicality of the game is mightily impressive. Hit a tyre wall and the objects scatter and bounce away from their position in the pile convincingly; wooden fences can be battered; telegraph poles knocked into the road and the wooden struts of elevated water tanks taken out to deliver a slapstick-style water cascade onto the racers following behind. It's *Wacky Races* but with an unprecedented level of realism.

The decision not to recreate real-world tracks and license vehicles has given Bugbear the freedom to use its physics systems in any way imaginable – and it shows. Take the car off-road and everything can be bashed, smashed and trashed. Though not currently implemented, Bugbear also promises the inclusion of fully ragdolled pilots who will jolt in their seats and even fly through windscreens should the impact be severe enough. Indeed, the team is so excited about this feature that an Olympics-style mini-game is being created: the goal being to crash your vehicle into a low wall and send the driver over the bonnet to get as much distance as possible.

The team are currently being coy about what online treats we can look forward to, but along with several mini-games and eight-player competitions, a *Destruction Derby* free-for-all is likely. Bugbear anticipates that everything will be ready by spring 2004. Just in time for a summer of rallying devastation.

Release Spring 2004

More car-crash porn for your delectation.

Expect to see more bouncing tyres than an episode of Fat Club.

COMING SOON!

Our special correspondent for Finland has gone into hibernation now, but when he creeps out of his cave in the spring we'll get him back on this.

- **Genre** Racing
- **Developer** Bugbear
- **Publisher** Empire

YOU'LL FALL IN LOVE WITH *FLAT-OUT* BECAUSE...

- Bodies flopping through windscreens will play a major role.
- Almost every object in the game can be broken, rammed or pushed into the road.
- A number of novelty mini-games are in production.
- Monosyllabic Finnish racing drivers aren't included.

Damage profoundly affects your car's handling. Theoretically, it's even possible to cross the finish line with just two wheels left.

UPCLOSE COURSE (RE)DESIGN

There will be three different locations in the game with 15 track variations in each area (making a total of 45 courses altogether). Many shortcuts are being built into the courses, most of which can only be found through intrepid exploration and experimentation. Expect dilapidated buildings that can be ripped through and woodpiles that can be disturbed to form ramps. Hooper eat your heart out.

Nitro can be fixed to the vehicle once enough money is earned from race wins. That'll please your ragdoll driver no end.

SCOOP! YOUR FIRST LOOK AT...

SINGLES
FLIRT UP YOUR LIFE

Craftily combining *The Sims* and, erm, *The Sims* – but with added adult extras. **By ROSS ATHERTON**

He's... He's copping a feel! Tsk. And in a family magazine, too.

DEVELOPER PROFILE

ROTOBEE
Country Germany
Established 2001
www.singles-the-game.com

Specialists in 3D character animation, Rotobee are clearly putting their motion-capture skills to good use with *Singles* – which in turn, they're hoping will help sell their animation software. Having said that, God knows when they get all of this done, as first impressions of the game suggest they've spent most of the last three years playing *The Sims*.

Previous Games: None.

IT'S all too easy to imagine a stereotypical player of *The Sims*: someone who, lacking or failing to pursue real-life social activity, lives life vicariously through his virtual avatars. A narrow-minded view, perhaps, but a plausible one. It doesn't take much imagination to extend the premise somewhat, and – as if by magic – someone's made a game about it.

Yes, *Singles: Flirt Up Your Life* is very much like *The Sims* except your main goal, not to put too fine a point on it, is to get your characters to make the beast with two backs. As its German developers Rotobee might (or might not) put it, play Hide the Bratwurst.

Peurile? Exploitative? Tacky? Less so on all counts than some games we could mention. And given a remarkable sheen of respectability by its presentation: well-animated characters move lithely through 3D architecture as viewed by a zoomable, rotatable camera. Brilliantly the whole affair is atmospherically lit to give a soft-focus effect.

But the view from this writer's high horse suggests that developers Rotobee have taken a little *too* much inspiration from *The Sims*, particularly in that the game's core mechanics are very similar. You simply have to manipulate the feelings of your two characters (no menages, a trois or otherwise, in this game), nudging them inexorably bedwards.

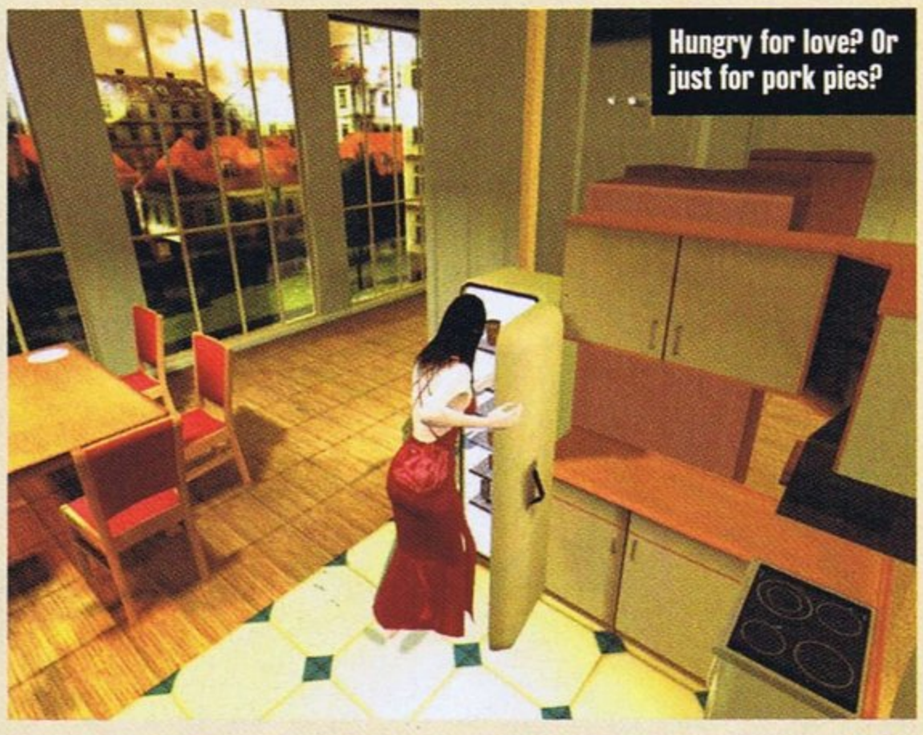
"WE'RE ASSURED IT WILL BE POSSIBLE TO PICK TWO CHAPS AS YOUR WOULD-BE LOVE BIRDS, OR EVEN TWO YOUNG LADIES."

As it stands, the eight factors for each character are food, relaxation, sleep, fun, relationship, hygiene, room and, erm, libido. Nurse these essentials and nature should take its course. The big difference from *The Sims*, apart from the 21st century visuals, is that there's none of that coy pixel-blurring when there's a little too much flesh on show, or when your courting couple get it on. Hence *Singles'* predicted 'R' certificate, and the ensuing embarrassment of anyone buying it.

Nudging is done via the magic medium of buying the pair additions to their love nest, and encouraging them to lead clean, well-fed, happy little lives. The tasks and choices on offer will naturally include housework – keeping up with it will please the other partner no end – and buying new consumer durables and furnishings in a variety of styles. They'll also go out to work, and one might return in a foul mood after a bad day in the office, scuppering your plans for a night of romance.

If it all sounds a little one-dimensional, a little imagination might prolong the pleasure, so to speak. At the outset, you're able to freely choose the two characters from a ready-made selection of 16; naturally there's a wide range of folk and some will be more or less compatible with others, offering you an organic difficulty setting. We're also assured it will be possible to pick two chaps as your would-be love-birds, or even two young ladies. But let's just nip this in the bud right now: no sending us *Singles* screenshots you've taken yourself, please. We just wouldn't be able to handle the excitement.

No *Sims*-style blurring will obscure your view when it gets steamy.


Hungry for love? Or just for pork pies?

COMING SOON!

Fnaarr, eh? *Coming* soon? Heh. But seriously: we'll have an update when we get our hands on an English-language version. Wahey!

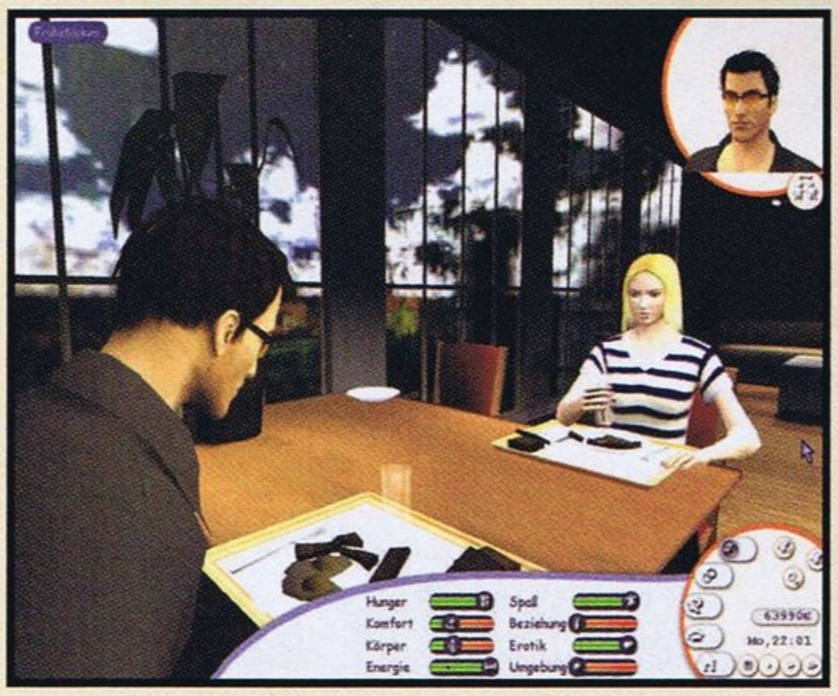
- **Genre** Lust Management
- **Developer** Rotobee
- **Publisher** Koch Media

YOU'LL FALL IN LOVE WITH *SINGLES* BECAUSE...

- It gives you what every *Sims* player secretly wants.
- The 3D presentation may yet shame *The Sims 2*.
- Steamy scenes are not just included: they're your *objective*.
- And yes, you *can* make two girls snog. Admit it: you were thinking the same.

UPCLOSE IN YOUR (INTER)FACE

The original interface on show in the work-in-progress version of the game bore a frightening resemblance to that of *The Sims*. Perhaps becoming concerned when EA's lawyers started circling overhead, it's been changed to the style you see below: concise, clear, useful and still remarkably familiar to anyone who's dabbled in Simsville. It speaks loud what is only otherwise implicit: *Singles* is directly inspired by EA's millions-seller.



Typical. Nothing but soppy rubbish on telly.

EYEWIT

THE PC GAMING UNIVERSE IN 12 PACKED PAGES!

SPECIAL NEWS REPORT

TIME TO CONSOLE YOURSELF?

Take a trip to Home Hardware and build your own console. Well, almost.

The world's first commercial console development kit will be hitting the shelves early next year. The XGameStation (wonderfully cheeky name there) is a DIY idea that enables you to both program your own games and applications, and build the console on which to run them. What's really exciting is that this is not just a software-based package. You actually get your own machine to toy around with and write for, and you can customise it with additional RAM, processors and all kinds of spangley add-ons.

Clearly, the XGameStation is far more hands-on than any current development kit, and is in fact designed specifically as a learning machine. In particular, it's being aimed at high school, college and graduate students with an interest in videogame design, and a basic knowledge of, well, BASIC. Currently priced between $US99 ($128) and $US199 ($257), it includes a console, all necessary power supplies and cables, one blank cartridge to program onto, and the complete development kit, supporting C, assembly language and the console's propriety development language XGameStation BASIC. Also included is the eBook *Build and Program Your Own Video Game*, written by developer Andre LaMothe.When it's time to get

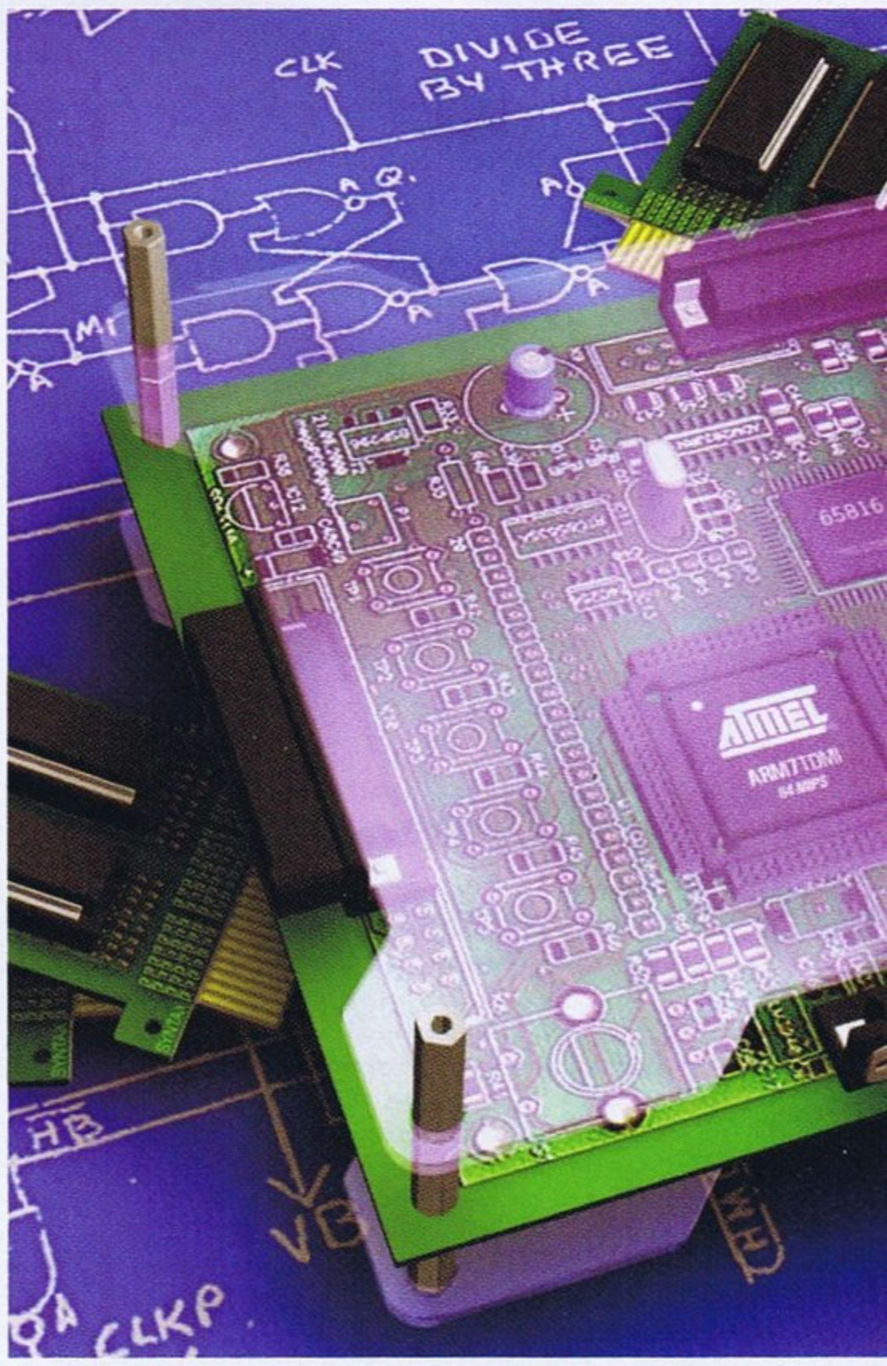
"Could create a new generation of bedroom programmers."

started, you can write, compile and edit on your PC before downloading your game to the cartridge to test it out. Make a masterpiece and you can let the world know by putting it on the web for download.

Current specs have the processing power of the XGameStation approximately ten times that of the Super Nintendo (SNES), and its graphical capabilities about 50-200% more advanced than Nintendo's classic console. Additionally, the graphics subsystem was specifically designed to emulate the best bits of the Atari 800, Apple II, Super Nintendo, and Commodore 64, the platforms that arguably drove gaming's most dynamic evolutionary period. At least in the US.

Although this raw processing power is miniscule in comparison to today's machines, it still gives budding Molyneuxs and Minters plenty to play with. And because would-be developers get their own mini-platform to play with, the XGameStation creators also hope to bring back some old-school charm to game design.

Considering that Xbox, PlayStation 2 and GameCube modders are actively prosecuted by faceless corporations for daring to make changes to their hardware, the XGameStation is ideal for anyone with an interest in game programming and hacking. Once you get the machine, whatever you do with it is up to you. Hardware modifications will be encouraged, as will spreading

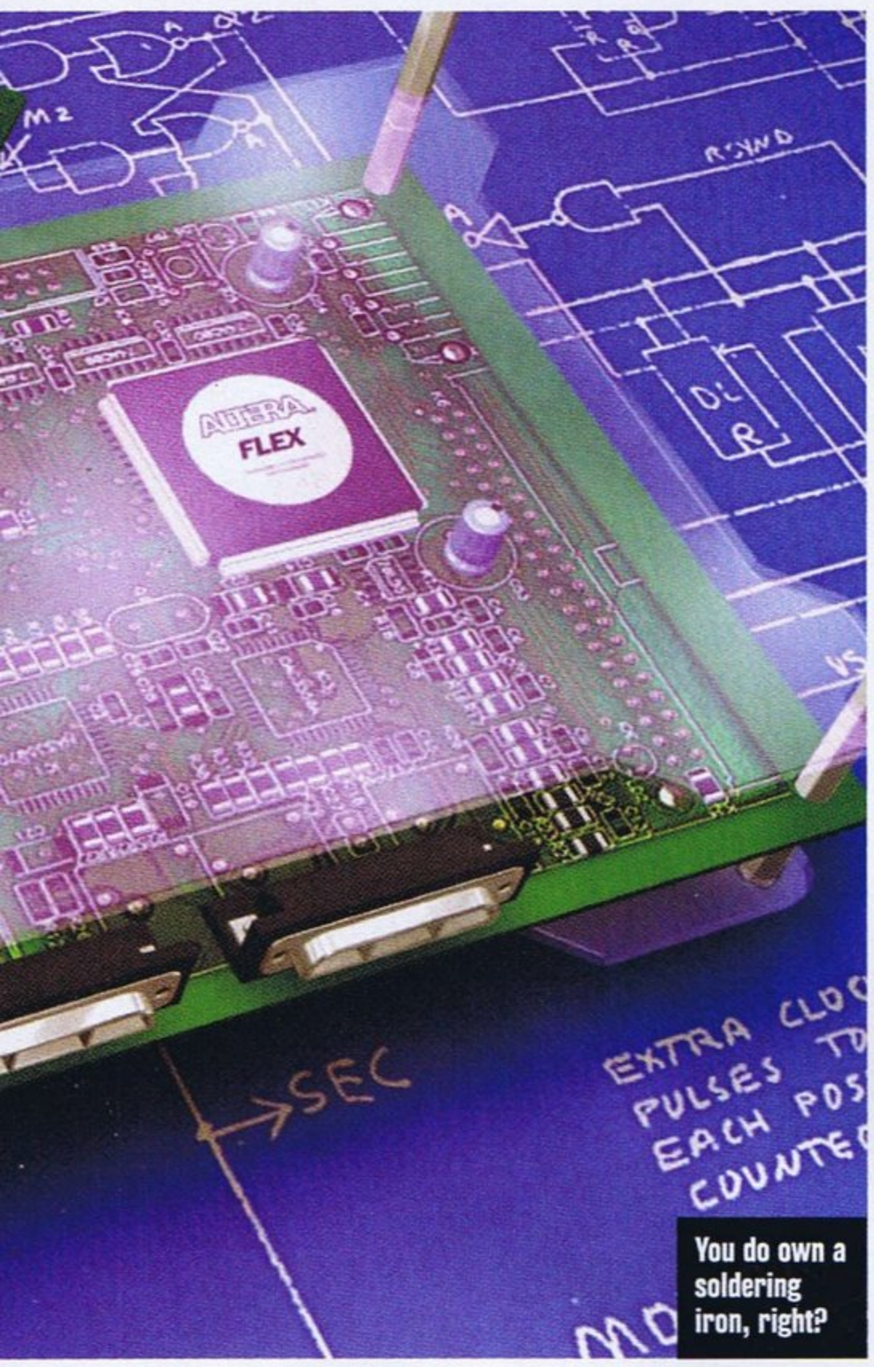


XGameStation

TNESS

There's something so very cool-sounding about the XGameStation. It'll hopefully introduce the discipline that comes with working on a small platform to the current community of coders, as well as the technical knowledge to squeeze every last ounce of power out of the platform.

CRAIG PEARSON, STAFF WRITER



You do own a soldering iron, right?

the knowledge of your tweaks through the community forums. You'll also have a full website at your disposal to help support and develop your work. Guides, demos and utilities will be available for download.

Currently available for pre-order, the XGameStation is in the final stages of preparation for release. The possibilities are intriguing. Could this create a new generation of bedroom programmers? Given the sheer genius and guts of the idea, we hope so.

Further Information

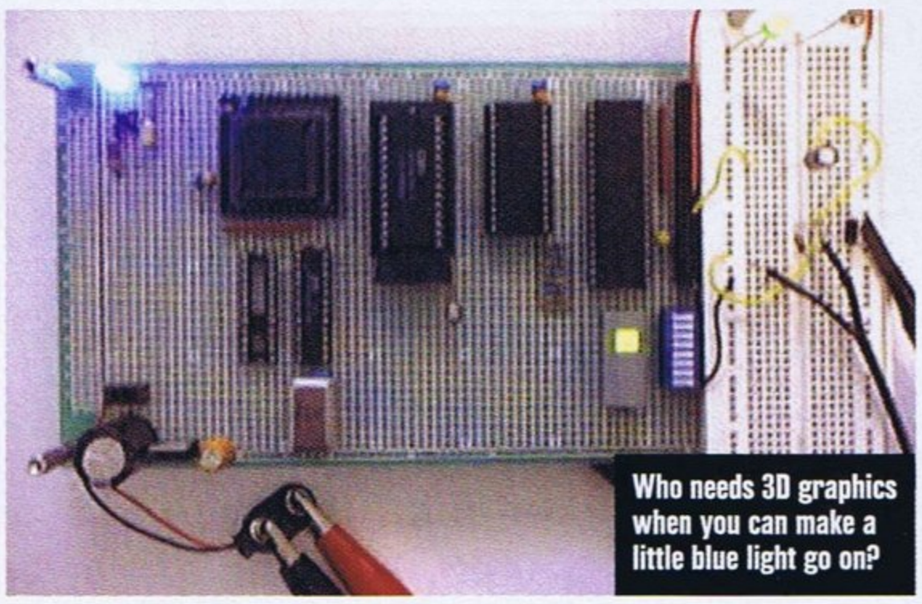
www.xgamestation.com
■ Your journey to game development riches starts here.

INDUSTRY STATEMENTS

ANDRE LAMOTHE
CEO NURVE

Andre' LaMothe, computer scientist and the world's best-selling game programming author is the project leader. We asked him about the thinking behind the XGameStation:

"I think it's something the world has needed for quite some time. Everywhere you look it's software, software, software, but no one really gets hyped about it. However, back in the 70s and 80s when people were masters of hardware as well, the amount of excitement and exploration was phenomenal. The Apple, Atari, and many other computers were the result of just this kind of enthusiasm, thus I am trying to bring something new and unique to the table to empower people to learn just a little about computer design, electronics, and video game consoles. I'll give you an example: the person writing the BASIC for the XGS is very smart, programs all the time, but programming is programming for him, and not that exciting. I just had him build a single board interface to connect an old Atari 2600 joystick to the parallel port and then interface his BASIC emulator still running on the PC, and he was more excited than I have ever seen him building this little piece of hardware. There is something about building real objects and then interfacing them that is really cool – if I can bottle it, and put it in this kit and book then who knows what might happen?"



Who needs 3D graphics when you can make a little blue light go on?

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Tim Stone doodles; we chuckle.
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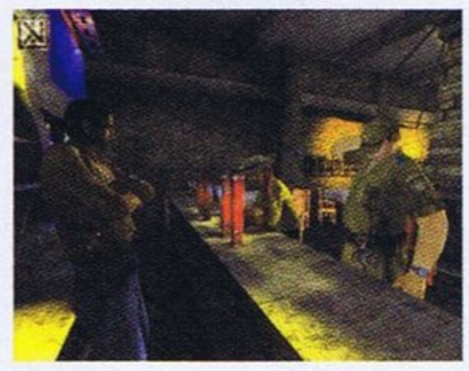
Choke down a red pill for all the new details.

SONIC ADVENTURE
Spin city with Sega's mascot.
14 **XENUS**
Colombian tale of drug-dealing badness.



SAVAGE
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The games you won't be playing any time soon.
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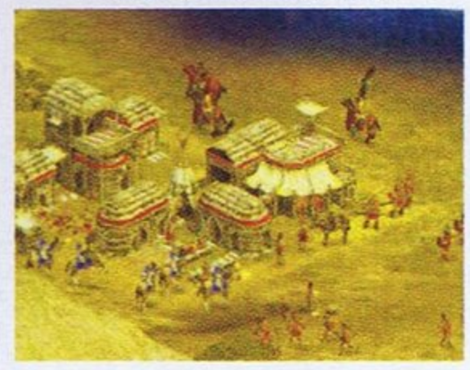
Excuse me, while we kiss this guy. No, hang on...
NEXUS
More names than a royal newborn.
16 **JOURNEY TO THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH**
It's hot.
RISE OF NATIONS: THRONES AND PATRIOTS
It's the American way.



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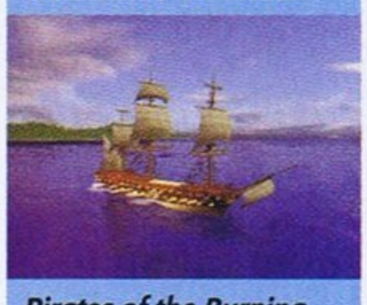
GOBBETS

STEAMY BRINE



***Pirates of the Burning Sea*, a new MMORPG with a buccaneering bent, is to be released through Valve's Steam network early in 2004. The charge will be $US10 a month, and Steam will be the only way you can buy it. Are Valve turning on their Steam pipe just to get some content on it, or is this a genuinely thought-out evolution from developers into publishers? Hmm.**
www.burningsea.com

ALL CUT UP

Running With Scissors, developers of the remorselessly offensive FPS *Postal 2*, have announced their multi-player expansion pack will be self-published, severing their connections with Whiptail. Spokesman Gary Coleman (yes, that one) made this statement: "Running With Scissors cut out the middleman with some serious vengeance! Now, they'll self-publish and we'll hit the ground running and won't stop 'til the ground tires out!" Quite. We would link to the website, but it contains porn.

WATCHET AND CLANK

***Operation Watchet Freedom* is a game set in the sleepy English village of Watchet, Somerset. Terrorists have taken it over and threaten to nuke some of the world's major cities. This FPS is being developed by Simply Gaming, who were originally a review website before closing due to lack of members. Better luck this time, chaps.**

ONLINE

STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT

R2-D2 meets *BF1942*. OM-FG!

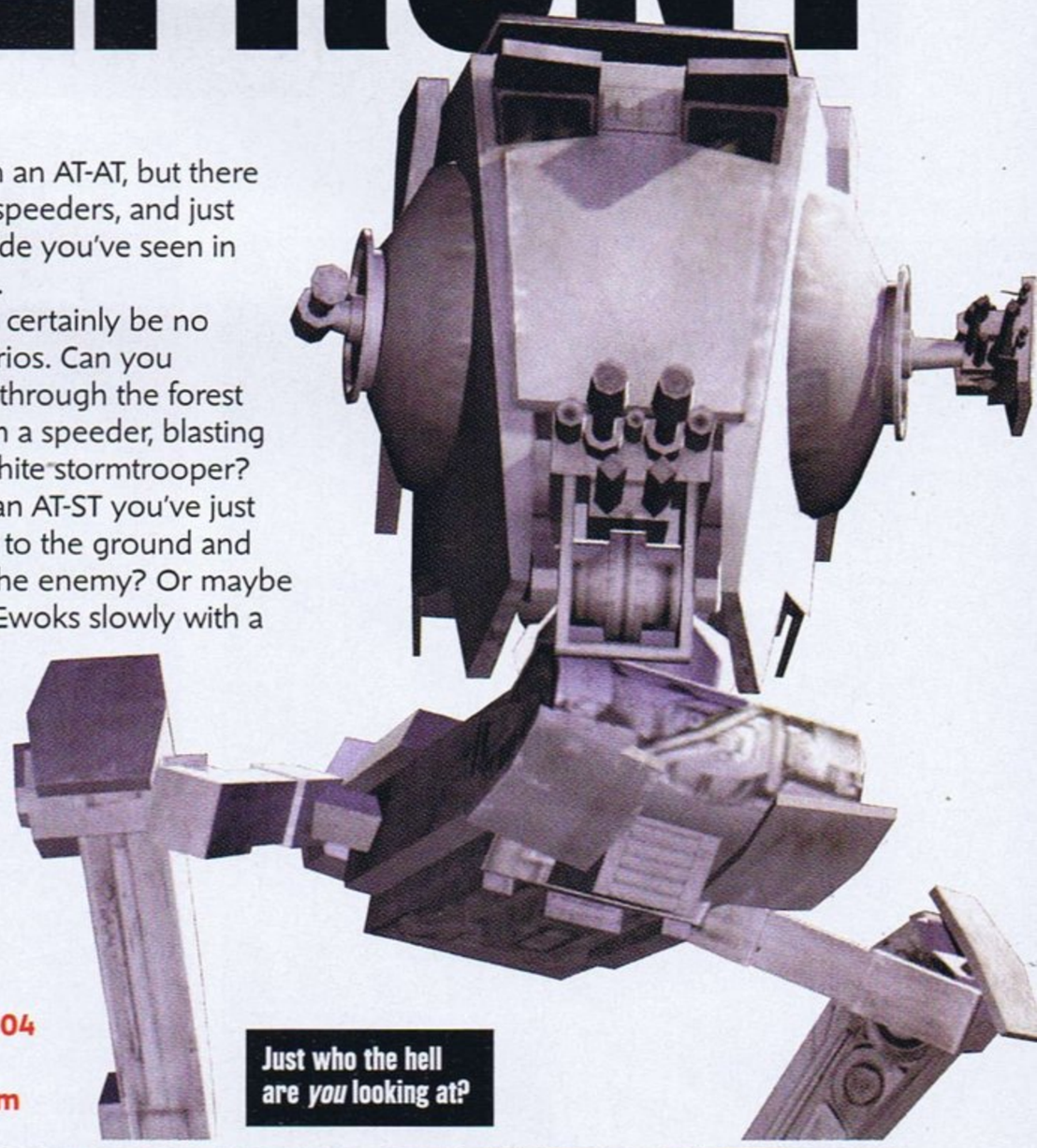
LucasArts have announced a *Battlefield 1942* style multi-player shooter, set within the *Star Wars* universe. It's being developed by Pandemic Studios, who've previously brought us the superb *Battlezone* games and *Dark Reign II*, not to mention *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* on console.

The details are scarce at the moment, the possibilities endless. We do know there are four factions, each fighting their natural enemy: Rebels take on the Empire and the Republic take on the Separatists. You can choose to slug it out either in the Galactic Civil War or the Clone Wars, with the combat taking place on a variety of planets. But there's no mixing of combatants, so Rebels can't take on Seperatists, the Republic can't fight the Empire. It's all in keeping with the tight reign LucasArts have on Star Wars lore, and should maintain the strong sense of place that all their games have.

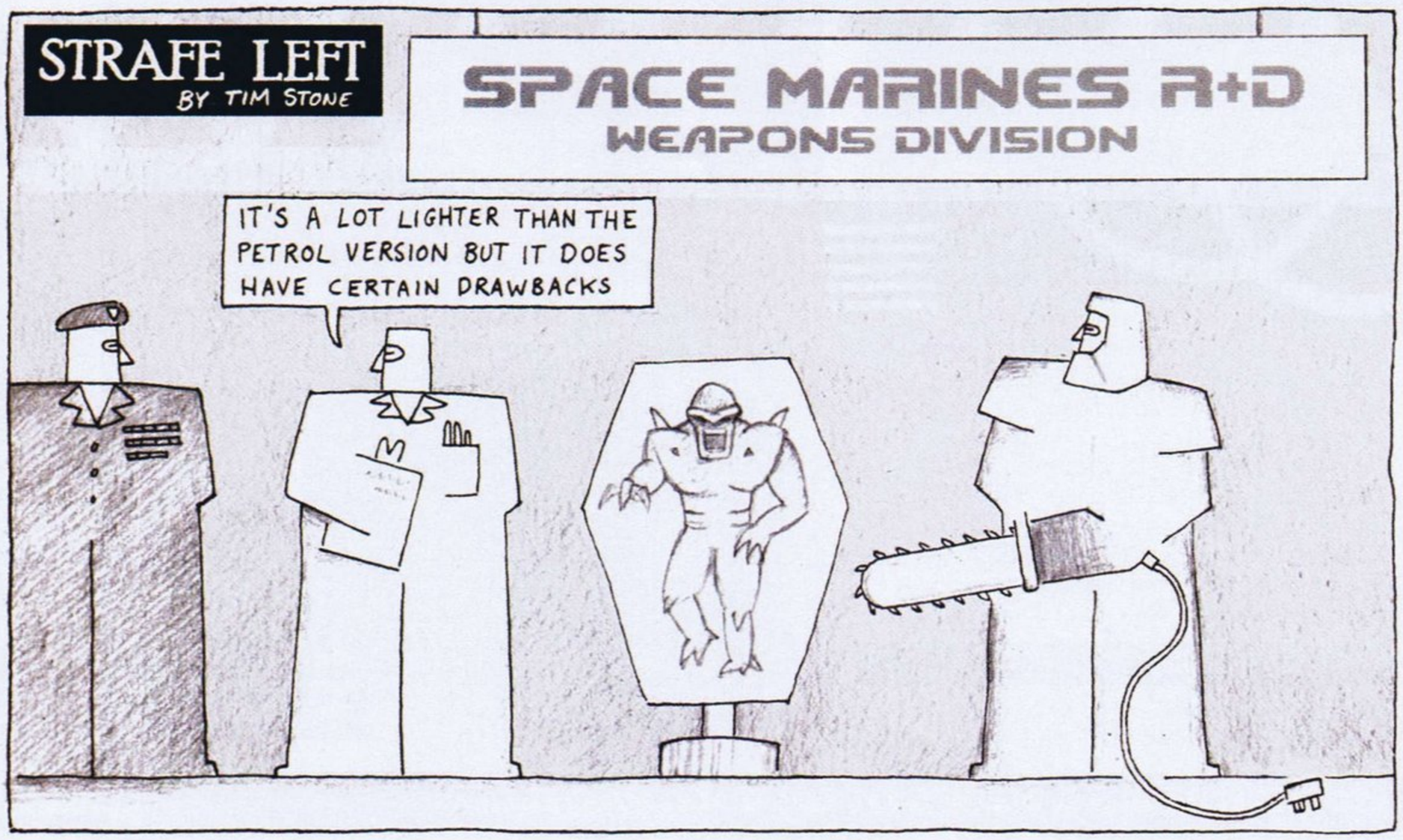
Just as in *BF 1942*, there are a number of vehicles to jump in. You can get your hands on an AT-AT, but there are also X-Wings, speeders, and just about any other ride you've seen in any of the movies.

There should certainly be no shortage of scenarios. Can you imagine shooting through the forest moon of Endor on a speeder, blasting away at a snow-white stormtrooper? Commandeering an AT-ST you've just implausibly roped to the ground and ploughing it into the enemy? Or maybe just running over Ewoks slowly with a sandcrawler. We know which we'd go for. Well, in 2004 you won't have to imagine. We can't wait. We'll have much more on this next issue.

■ **Release date** 2004
■ **Website**
www.lucasarts.com



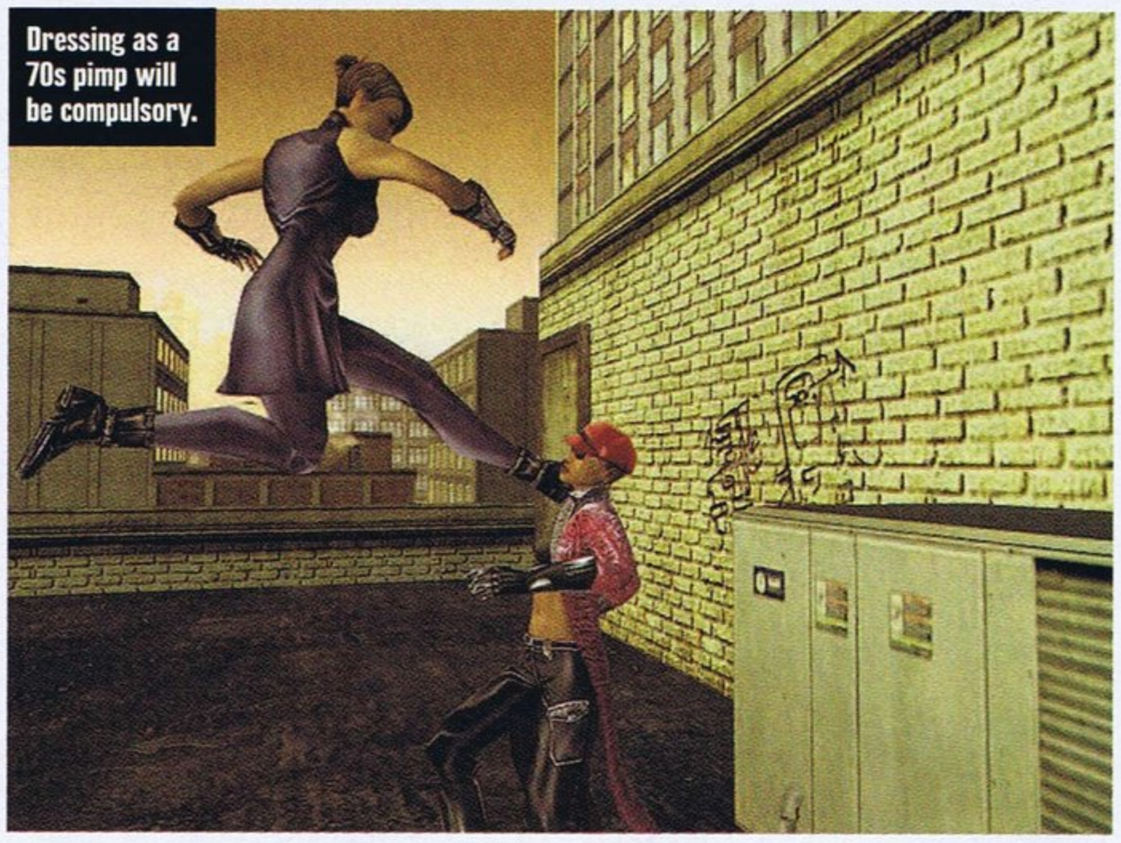
Just who the hell are *you* looking at?


STRAFE LEFT
BY TIM STONE
SPACE MARINES R+D
WEAPONS DIVISION
IT'S A LOT LIGHTER THAN THE PETROL VERSION BUT IT DOES HAVE CERTAIN DRAWBACKS

MMORPG

THE MATRIX ONLINE

Take the red pill and explore the Wachowskis' Wonderland.



Dressing as a 70s pimp will be compulsory.

More details and screenshots have emerged for the MMORPG *The Matrix Online*. With the (look away now if you haven't seen the last film) survival of the Matrix at the end of *Revolutions*, it seems that humanity will lead a dual existence, both inside and outside the evil virtual reality enslavement system of the machines.

WARNING! SPOILER

You play a character newly rescued from the Matrix. Your levelling up is done through Ability Code. Just as in the movies, if you require knowledge it can be dumped right into your head. It's a system that should certainly give players more freedom than the classical MMORPG process. You can remove and swap abilities when you please and trade them with other characters, so you're never locked into one role or path for your character. The limited memory slots you start off with as a character will leave you with only space for a few abilities, but as your memory increases you can add more. A new combat system is also being developed to take advantage of the vast array of complex manoeuvres available to you, something else atypical of online games. 'Interlock' will create a series of moves that combo together to emulate the liquid feel of combat in the films, with targeting and tactical modes to integrate into the flow. Even through a 56k connection, apparently, it should feel just like the movies.

■ **Release date** 2004
■ **Website** thematrixonline.ubi.com

ARCADE ADVENTURE

SONIC ADVENTURE DIRECTOR'S CUT

Altogether now: say "Gaaaahh".

Knuckles' life of crime catches up with him as he's forced to ditch his loot.

Sonic's doctor has a cruel treatment for vertigo: wind him up and let him go.

Sega have announced they're bringing their tail-spinning, body-twisting bright blue hedgehog to the PC again. This time in *Sonic Adventure 3D*, a port of their console speedster, and possibly the best *Sonic* game of all time.

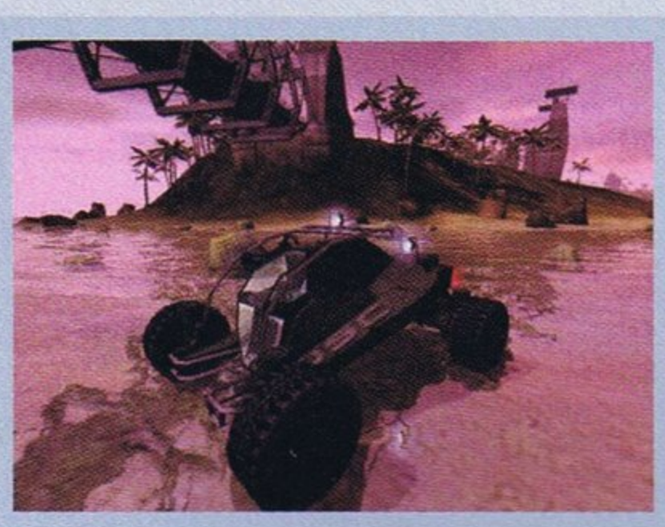
The original Dreamcast game was pure Japanese platform insanity of the kind that only Sega could conjure: precisely the sort of speed-infused, twitch-gaming intensity they're loved for. From what we've seen there's no reason to think the PC version will be any different. Sonic must once again take on his nemesis, Dr Robotnik and the newer, water-based foe Chaos, through a variety of colourful levels. The familiar loops, slopes, collectable rings, and bouncepads are all present, as are the cast of characters Sega have built up over the years. So Sonic the Hedgehog will be running around with Tails the Flying Fox and Knuckles the Echnida, with each character bringing a special ability to the team, as well as their own storyline to follow.

Adventure modes, race modes and all kinds of unlockable arcade goodness are promised, and all done at an eye-bleedingly fast pace. If jumpy, bouncy arcade action is your thing then it looks as if you're in for a treat . We'll have more on this very soon.

■ **Release date** 2004
■ **Website** www.sega.com

STILL CENTRAL

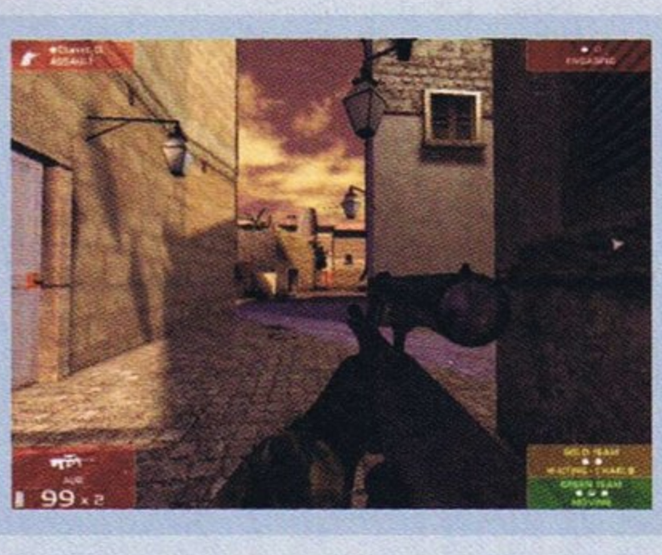
THESE ARE THE GAMES YOU *WON'T* BE PLAYING ANY TIME SOON.



BREED

CDV

No, we couldn't believe it either. Well, actually, we could. It suffered enough last year, and now the latest release date is planned for early 2004. That's as accurate as we can be with a game that's as slippery as a greased pig being chased by a redneck.



TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX 3: ATHENA SWORD

Ubisoft

The expansion pack for the Clancy thriller has slipped, but will hopefully be out by the time you read this. No reasons given, so we're assuming it's because the CIA or whatever want to make sure the game contains wholesome All American killin' for the post-holiday lull. Peace.

COUNTER-STRIKE CONDITION ZERO

Vivendi

Well, it slipped. We do know that it's finished, with the developers Turtle Rock letting us know via their forum post. But we're still waiting for it to actually appear on Steam, with the retail release to follow. The estimate is sometime in February. Keep them crossed.

ONLINE RTSS

SAVAGE

Jesters take a stroll in the most *Savage* of gardens.

Publishing newcomers Digital Jesters have extended their range by snapping up the promising multi-player mauler, *Savage*.

Developed by California-based S2 Games, *Savage* is a title we've been watching for some time. It's an ambitious mix of first-person and real-time strategy and is being touted as the first RTSS – that's real time strategy shooter for acronym buffs.

It pitches the scientifically savvy Humans against the treehugging, spellcasting Beasts. You can take the fight to the enemy as a footsoldier, mastering weapons and combat techniques with a first- or third-person view of the action. Or you can stand back and take the role of Commander, building bases, gathering resources and piecing together the battle plan for your soldiers via a more traditional RTS outlook.

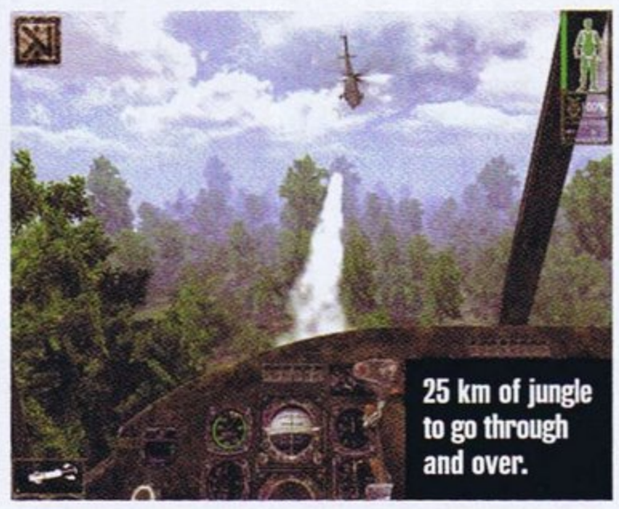
A dedicated multi-player game played over the net, *Savage* has already been released in the US and the Jesters plan to bring the war to these shores by February with free online play. .

■ **Release date** February 2004
■ **Website** www.s2games.com

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER

XENUS

Move into the jungle massive.



We've walked the streets of Vice City. We've sniped from the rooftops of Liberty City. Hell, we've even stalked orcs in the province of Morrowind. In every case we've wandered across the land as we see fit. But in *Xenus*, the theoretical gamer paradise of free-flowing terrain and truly enormous vistas will be put to the ultimate test. Ukranian developer Deep Shadows are building a 25 kilometre square of dense tropical jungle, and the cities, towns, outposts and bases to go with it.

Xenus is a detective story at heart, set during a time of intense political unrest in a Columbia-like province. Drugs, corruption, Marxist propaganda and AK-47s are all stirred into an enormous game pot. You'll be able to hijack helicopters, and all manner of local transport.

If the Vice City comparison isn't enough to truly whet your appetite, Deep Shadows are clearly influenced by the first-person RPG structure of *Deus Ex*. The choices that you make within the game determine your alignment to all sorts of fearsome factions; from the communist forces to drug barons, native indians and, of course, local law enforcement. Based on what we know, we're extremely excited about *Xenus*, and we'll bring you more information as soon as we can.

■ **Release date** 2004
■ **Website** http://www.deep-shadows.com/en/index.php

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER

VIETCONG PURPLE HAZE

Not the effect of too many viagra pills.

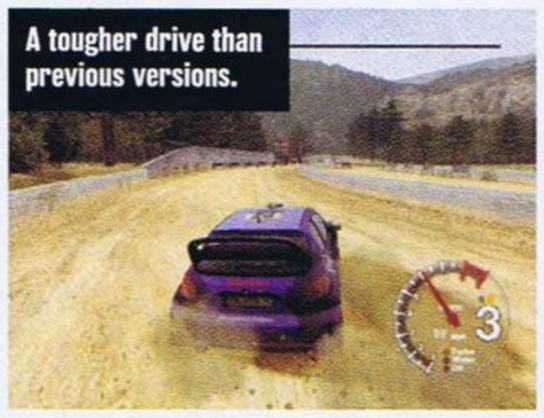
The add-on pack to the raw-as-razorburn *Vietcong* will be hitting the shelves any time now. *Vietcong: Purple Haze* will replace the standalone version of the game, and includes the original as well as the add-on pack.

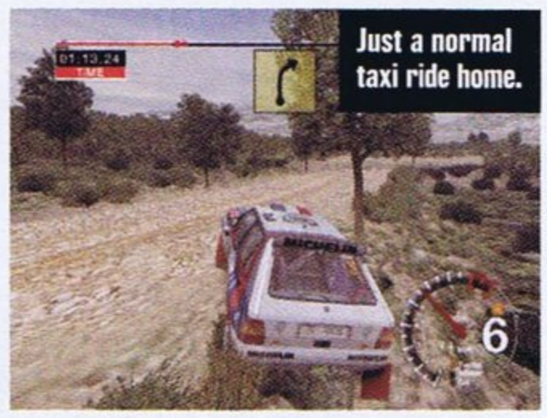
Your hard-earned cash will get you 29 single-player missions, 17 multi-player missions and the full level editor. There's a full 35 weapons in total, including the addition of bayonets and machetes to your arsenal. Also promised are airstrikes and artillery support.

The addition of extra multiplayer levels will please the hardcore fans who've formed tight-knit communities in the last few months, but the real gem should be the level editor. Given the non-politically correct nature of the original missions, it'll be interesting to see what the *Vietcong* community drum up with this.

■ **Website** www.vietcong-game.com
■ **Release** February 2004

RACING SIMULATION





COLIN McRAE 04

Colin all cars.

Colin McRae Rally 04 is making the jump to the PC, and we have the first details right here. The huge-selling series is undergoing something of an engine tweak from previous editions.

The enhanced PC incarnation will allow up to eight LAN players to co-operate or compete through Championship or single-stage races. Car enthusiasts (read, fetishists) will have over 20 gleaming models to choose from, eight international rally locations (Australia, UK, Sweden, USA, Finland, Spain, Greece, and Japan) to race through, each with six stages. There will also be four Super Special stages included.

But the improvements don't just sit in the background – there's a profoundly different driving model to *McRae 03*.

There's an added management level as well, with technology to be unlocked during seasons, so you can get about tweaking under the bonnet. PC Games Addict will be taking a test drive soon.

■ **Website** www.codemasters.com/colinmcrae04
■ **Release** March 2004

HOT NEW OFFERS!

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REAL-TIME STRATEGY

RISE OF NATIONS
THRONES AND PATRIOTS

Rise of Nations reaches the Age of Expansion. -20% to magazine output.

Microsoft has announced that it's own *Age of Mythology*-beating strategy game, *Rise of Nations*, is to be blessed with an expansion pack. *Thrones and Patriots* will add six new nations to the impeccably balanced mix, along with new historical units, and national wonders.

RoN blends *Civ*-like historical development with frantic speed. You can advance from throwing spears to lobbing nukes across your borders in half an hour, by balancing your economic and military output. Now that's progress.

When it was first released, a vocal minority demanded to know why America wasn't included as a playable nation (because they're a bunch of Johnny-come-latelys with no real culture of their own, obviously). It's expected that *Thrones and Patriots* will remedy this, while exploring other, novel choices. You'll now be given the option to decide the form of government that your peons live under. Expect a fat, lazy, civilian army under Democracy, and so on. Big Huge Games are also making historical campaigns for *RoN*.

Website www.bighuge games.com
Release Spring 2004

"Jettisoning tea now, sir."

ADVENTURE

JOURNEY TO THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH

It sounds lava-ly.

The blockage in the U-bend of the adventure game pipeline appears to have been freed. First we got *Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon*, and now *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*.

Verne started his own journey to the centre of the Earth in 1805, and despite the fact that he only made it six feet down GMX are scheduling for their game to hit the shelves near the anniversary of his death. Apparently GMX's 'tribute' also extends to taking liberties with the story. A plucky young journalist named Ariane is covering a story on the edge of a volcano, when the ground opens up beneath her feet and she splash lands in a subterranean lagoon. Our heroine has to make a decision. Does she stay for a paddle, or search for a way upward and outward? GMX are promising over 30 hours of play, so expect some truly fiendish puzzles, challenges, and character-based obstacles. Just don't think you can solve the entire game by USING the SPADE with the SOIL.

Website www.gmxmedia.net/jce
Release Autumn 2004

Pure magic.

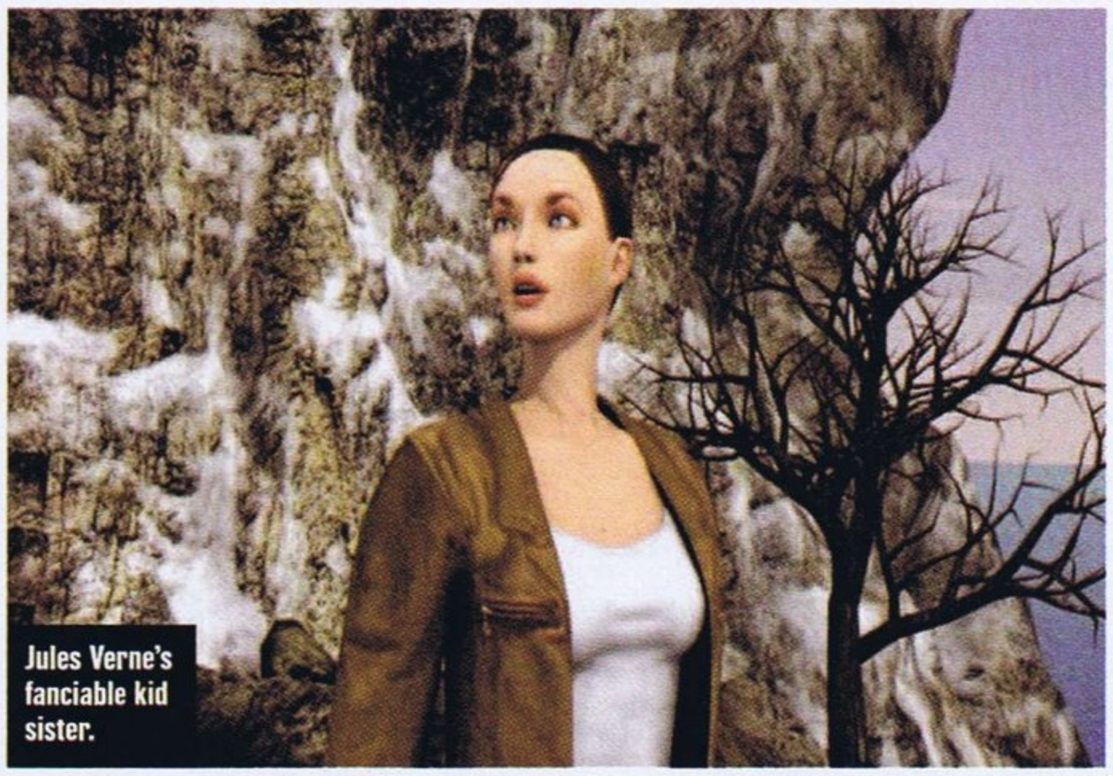

Jules Verne's fanciable kid sister.

ILLUSTRATION: STEVE LILLIE

DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

RANTINGS FROM THE SOAPBOX OF GAMING

SCRIPTED SET-PIECES REVOLUTIONISED THE FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER. NOW THEY'RE THREATENING THE GENRE'S FUTURE, ARGUES CHRIS BUXTON. GIVE US YOUR VIEW: PCGA@DERWENTHOWARD.COM.AU

Life is full of disappointments. Realising that I haven't always had this high a forehead and am, alas, losing some hair. Exhausting the last crumbs at the bottom of a packet of Pork Scratchings. Playing *Call of Duty*. Yes, Infinity Ward's universally praised World War II opus left me wanting more. And I don't mean more than its rather short-lived 24 levels. And, no, not more of its often intense spectacle: it's hard to think of a more action-packed title. No, what I wanted was a simpler thing. So simple that you can't help but wonder how it was overlooked. What I wanted was more interactivity.

Now, I don't mean to pick on *Call of Duty* especially. After all, it's a very enjoyable, highly polished title, with some memorable moments and its equal opportunity employment policy – Yanks, Tommys and Reds all in it together – is admirable. But this game is so painstakingly scripted that it often feels like every step you make is predetermined, that you're just there to trigger the next set piece, that... well, that you're watching, no make that *acting*, in a movie rather than playing a game.

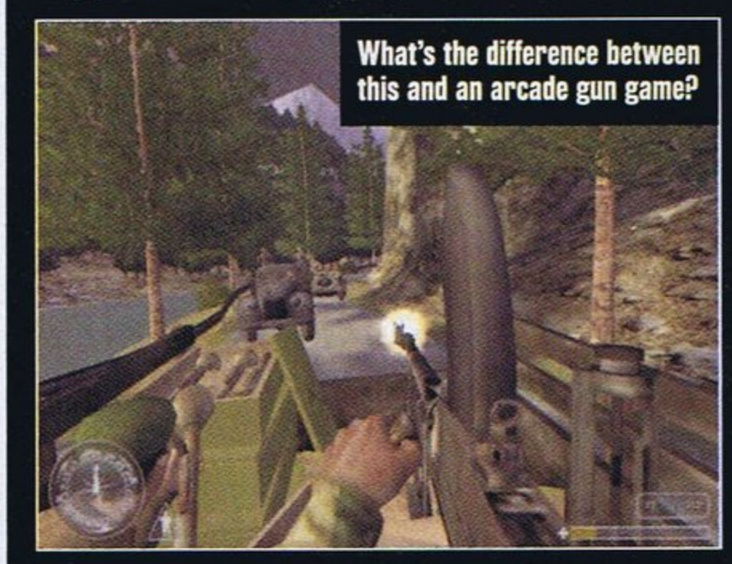
It's not that I think Infinity Ward are frustrated filmmakers, nor that the odd scripted sequence doesn't add to a game. No, the problem is that so much about *Call of Duty* smacks of scripting over substance, and not just the obvious set-pieces. Take the abundance of medikits and the enemies who don't know when they're dead – surely this is heavy tweaking *after* the fact? It's almost as if the game was scripted and developed and then the playtesters reported that the Axis and Allies needed a lot of help in a lot of places to make it anywhere near a balanced experience. Surely not.

And then there's the way the levels throw you right in to the heart of things. It may make for excitingly hectic action sequences, but without sufficient build-up they become almost meaningless firefights, diminishing those crucial feelings of anticipation and achievement that are key elements of single-player first-person shooters.

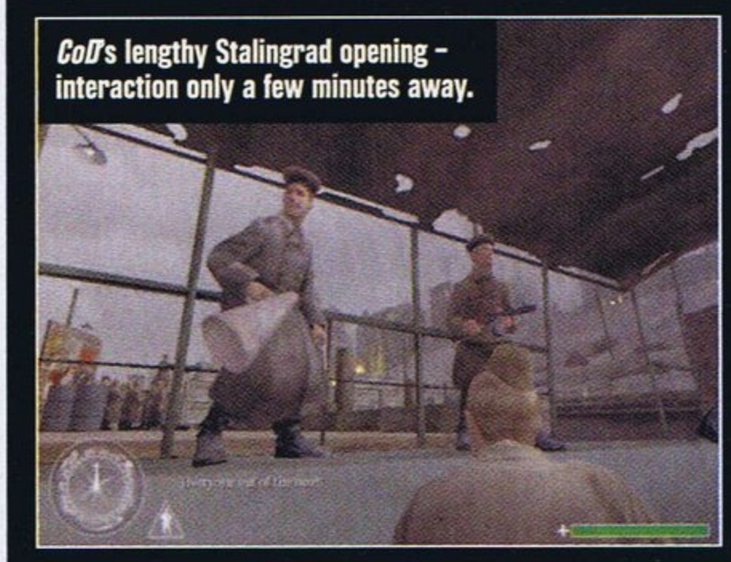
Betraying his obsessively analytical character, **Chris Buxton** is trying to find the perfect biscuit for his favourite cheeses. Oatcakes and Stilton are popular, but Tuc crackers with ripe Brie have proved to be the ideal gaming snack.

"The illusion of freedom has been worn wafer thin in games like *Call of Duty*."

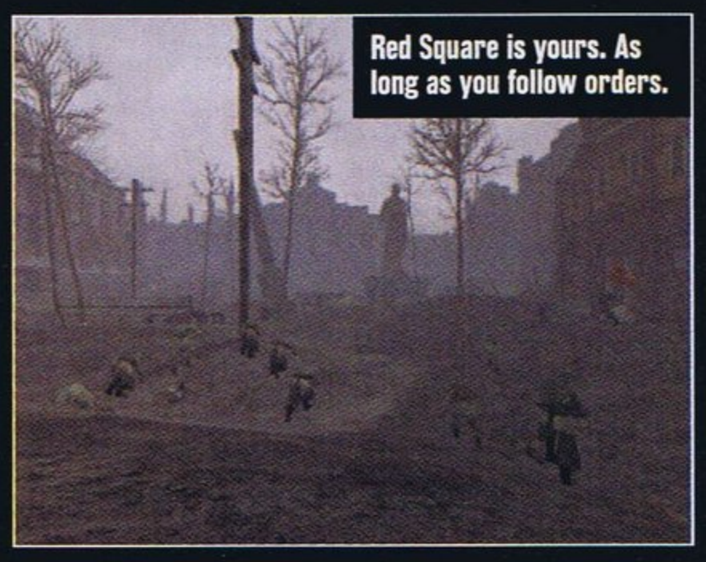
Most grievous of all, though, is the fact that because of its heavily scripted nature, there really is only one way to play *Call of Duty*. Not only does this kill any replay factor, it also robs the gamer of their traditional role as Improviser-in-Chief. It's obvious that the FPS has come a long way since the days of the corridor shooter but, in a sense, *Call of Duty* is just as restrictive. Sure, you're given Stalingrad's Red Square to retake but there's only one way you can do it and you're led by the hand all the way by a comrade. And this is just one example of many. So ask yourself a question: Is there that much difference between how *Call of Duty* plays and the way arcade gun games like *House of the Dead* and *Silent Scope* serve up their targets?



What's the difference between this and an arcade gun game?



***CoD*'s lengthy Stalingrad opening – interaction only a few minutes away.**



Red Square is yours. As long as you follow orders.

Anyway, I've not come here to bury *Call of Duty* or to praise it – it just happens to be the current 'ne plus ultra' of scripted FPS games. That makes it a waypoint as to the genre's future, hell, maybe it's even a warning. Cue a smattering of woolly buzzwords like 'emergent' and 'non-linear' as developers, gamers and critics alike struggle to define where the FPS should go next. Complete freedom is, of course, impossible, not to mention undesirable. But the illusion of freedom – an essential ingredient in any successful game, no matter what the genre – has been worn wafer thin in games like *CoD*.

The next great step forward for the first-person shooter will have to combine measured storytelling with big movie-like moments and yet give the player scope to play in a variety of ways. That remains a big ask, especially as it involves a lot of man hours developing stuff that many gamers may not bother or care to discover.

Medal of Honour's acclaim – and that heaped on the Omaha sequence in particular – led directly to *Call of Duty* stretching the potential of the scripted set-piece to its limit. My fear is that what follows could be even more prescriptive and less interactive.

GOBBETS

ZOMBIES! RUN OR BE THE DINNER

Usually we come up with a witty pun to introduce a game in Gobbets. Not with this one. *Zombies! Run Or Be The Dinner* is eye-catching enough on its own. It's FPS survival horror, where you take on shuffling undead brain-munchers. The whole thing is a mystery. What's happening? Where do they come from? But these questions don't get in the way of the lead-to-head action. Find screenshots, answers and more at http://zombies.krysalide.fr/game_infos.html.

LET'S MODIFY

Given how popular the *Half-Life* level editor was, it comes as no surprise to learn that Valve are coding lots of neat *Half-Life 2* tools. Surprisingly, they're also allowing a book to be written on the subject. US website Gamestop is listing the "Half-Life 2 Mod-Maker's Guide" to be released in March 2004. Additionally, "Half-Life 2: Raising the Bar – A Behind The Scenes Look" is being listed in Prima's website as a release for next year.

MORE SOCCING IT TO THEM.

Big Ben Interactive have announced their latest football management game. *Soccer Manager Pro*, from JoWooD, offers a stunning 3D engine and direct influence over play as it happens. Sports Interactive might as well pack up and go home. Run to www.bigbeninteractive.co.uk

THE SPY

THE INVISIBLE WAR BECOMES ALL TOO VISIBLE AND THE WORLD GETS HACKING.

ILLUSTRATION DAVID LYTTLETON

The Spy always has sympathy for other spies. Those brave soldiers, existing on the periphery of life, running in shadows. So it's with regret that your Spyness had to witness the dissection of Alex D. of *Deus Ex: Invisible War* fame.

The controversy began when the demo hit the web. Instead of the expected tsunami of adulation, poor Ion Storm had to endure a blizzard of criticism. The demo, while interesting and varied, was not well received by the *DX* hardcore. Web dwellers aren't known for their restraint, and lambasted the developers with a broadside of complaints. The number of criticisms levied at the game was enough to make this Spy flinch. The biggest bugbears raised were the simplification of the controls, the obvious console leanings and the inventory system. It soon emerged that many of these problems could be fixed, as the community began chopping away at the .ini file, making their own adjustments to the internal workings of the game.

What was more remarkable was the response from Ion Storm. Warren Spector himself popped up on the net and posted a handy FAQ, letting the people know exactly what to change in the inner workings of his years-in-the-making game and where to change it. With Warren's Handy Guide To Hacking *DX:I* (as The Spy likes to call it) there are a number of tweaks that smooth over some of the more controversial elements (including a bug that stops the game saving altered key bindings and resolution changes). If you feel like having a go at flicking the playable demo's internal switches, please consult **http://66.193.119.177/index.php?showtopic=205527** first. It's what Alex D would want.

The Spy has also been following with interest the story of Sport Interactive's latest venture into the world of management simulation. The *Championship Manager 4* team have been left without a publisher since creative differences made them high-tail it from the cosy bosom of Eidos. They're now hard at work on *Eastside Hockey Manager: Franchise Edition* (a working title hopefully), and have announced that Sega will publish the game. As it's about ice hockey The Spy hopes they bag an NHL licence for this one. Will Sports Interactive work their management magic on other sports? Cricket, snooker, boxing? The Spy can say no more.

The Spy's also been looking on, drooling, as the Xbox-only *Fable* takes shape. It's currently looking like a genuine evolution of the RPG genre. So it's with unrestrained glee that The Spy is able to report that there's a strong rumour suggesting *Fable* may be heading PC-wards after all. Apparently, Microsoft have the final say on the project. Come on Bill. Yet another developer, Jeff Briggs (President of Firaxis), has let slip that work is under way on *Civilization 4*. Unfortunately he was silenced before divulging date or details.

And finally, The Spy's Russian connections report that the Spector man himself is chatting to former Looking Glass and Irrational Games people to bring us... blimey... *System Shock 3*. Excuse The Spy while he lies down for a while. The Spy is quite literally out.

"There's a strong rumour that *Fable* may be heading our way."

THE OFFICIAL PC GAMES addict TOP TEN

1	(1)	The Sims Deluxe	EA
2	(2)	The Sims: Makin' Magic	EA
3	(3)	The Sims: Superstar	EA
4	(4)	The Sims: Unleashed	EA
5	(5)	The Sims: Vacation	EA
6	(6)	Need For Speed: Underground	EA
7	RE	Cricket 2004	EA
8	(7)	Call Of Duty	Activision
9	(9)	The Sims: Hot Date	EA
10	NE	The Sims: Collectors Edition	EA

Charts compiled by Inform (www.informbd.com.au)

inform *Charts can be viewed at* **www.informbd.com.au** *as part of Inform's comprehensive database of online market intelligence, updated weekly*

Inform tracks the weekly sales of business and leisure technology products, and provides detailed reports to subscribers and Reseller & Retail panel members. For subscription or panel membership details phone 02 9264 0095. Copyright © 2002 by Inform. All rights reserved.

PC GAMES addict RECOMMENDED

SUMMER'S HERE, BUT PLAYING THESE GAMES IS MUCH MORE FUN THAN WEARING SPEEDOS.

Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time

83%

The feelgood hit of the summer. Enjoy fast-paced, warm nights out with the Prince in his soft silk pyjamas. Good controls and some awe-inspiring level design go to make this the best PC action adventure game in a long time.

Star Wars: KotOR

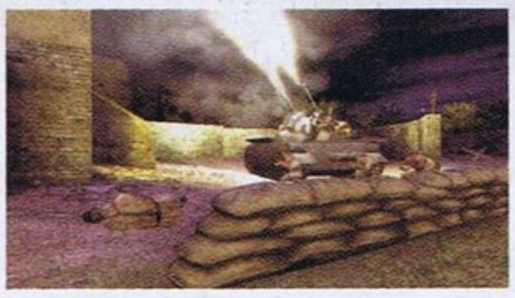
92%

From the makers of *Neverwinter Knights* and *Baldur's Gate* comes this, Bioware's most accessible RPG to date. It's a fully 3D, epic scale story of downfall, retribution and redemption, set in the *Star Wars* universe some 4,000 years BC – Before Chewbacca.

Halo: Combat Evolved

91%

The subtitle gives the game away; it's pure science fiction combat, with the flab and fat of first-person action stripped away, leaving raw violence and a fantastic atmosphere. The multiplayer is all-consuming, swallowing days with its crazy fun.



Call of Duty

91%

If *Medal of Honour* demonstrated what WWII games could be capable of, *Call of Duty* is the realisation of that promise. The extravagant battle scenes are cinema squared. It's the new red-flag bearer of first-person shooters, and essential.

DONE WHEN IT'S DONE

Key to charts **New entry this month** ● *Sounds about right to us* ● *Are you really sure about that?* ● *Yeah, right. Dream on, buddy.*

GAME NAME	PUBLISHER	LATEST RELEASE DATE
Age of Empires 3	Microsoft	TBA ●
Armed & Dangerous	Activision	February 2004 ●
Black & White 2	Electronic Arts	Spring 2004 ●
Breed	CDV	2004 ●
BloodRayne 2	Vivendi	TBA ●
Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth	TBA	2004 ●
Close Combat: Afrika Korps	GMX	TBA ●
Codename: Panzers	CDV	Autumn 2004 ●
Colin McRae Rally 4.0	Codemasters	March 2004 ●
Conan	TDK	Autumn 2004 ●
Cossacks II: Napoleonic Wars	CDV	Autumn 2004 ●
Crazy Taxi 3	Empire	January 2004 ●
Delta Force Black Hawk Down Team Sabre	Novalogic	Autumn 2004 ●
Deus Ex: Invisible War	Eidos	March 2004 ●
Deus Ex 3	Eidos	TBA ●
Doom III	Activision	May 2004 ●
Duke Nukem Forever	Rockstar	2004 ●
Dungeon Siege 2	Microsoft	2004 ●
Dungeons & Dragons Online	Atari	2005 ●
Drake	Vivendi	January ●
Driver 3	Atari	Autumn 2004 ●
Everquest II	Ubi Soft	June 2004 ●
Evil Genius	Vivendi	March 2004 ●
Far Cry	Ubi Soft	Autumn 2004 ●
Freedom Force vs The Third Reich	TBA	Autumn 2004 ●
Full Spectrum Warrior	THQ	Winter 2004 ●
Ground Control 2	Vivendi	March 2004 ●
Half-Life 2	Vivendi	May 2004 ●
Hidden & Dangerous 3	Take Two	TBA ●
Hitman: Contracts	Eidos	2004 ●
IL-2 Sturmovik Expansion	Ubi Soft	February 2004 ●
Jagged Alliance 2: Wildfire	Strategy First	Autumn 2004 ●
Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising	Novalogic	March 2004 ●
Journey to the Centre of the Earth	GMX	February 2004 ●
Kill Bill	Vivendi	2005 ●
Kingdom Under Fire: Crusaders	Phantagram	TBA ●
Knightshift	Koch	March 2004 ●
Lords of the Realm III	Vivendi	February 2004 ●
March! Off-World Recon	Oxygen	March 2004 ●
Medal of Honour: Pacific Assault	Electronic Arts	April 2004 ●
Men of Valour: Vietnam	Vivendi	Spring 2004 ●
Middle-Earth Online	Vivendi	2004 ●
Operation Flashpoint 2	Codemasters	2005 ●
Panzers	CDV	Summer 2004 ●
Perimeter	Codemasters	2004 ●
Pirates!	Atari	2004 ●
Quake IV	Activision	Christmas 2004 ●
Race Driver 2: Ultimate Racing Simulator	Codemasters	Winter 2004 ●
Restricted Area	4am	April 2004 ●
Richard Burns Rally	SCi	March 2004 ●
Rise of Nations: Thrones and Patriots	Microsoft	Autumn 2004 ●
Rome: Total War	Activision	Spring 2004 ●
Sacred	Koch	2004 ●
Sam & Max 2	Activision	March 2004 ●
Settlers Of Catan	Capcom	2004 ●
Silent Hill 4: The Room	Konami	2004 ●
Singles	Koch	February 2004 ●
Sniper Elite	Wanadoo	Autumn 2004 ●
Soldner: Secret Wars	Bigben	March 2004 ●
Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow	Ubi Soft	March 2004 ●
S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Oblivion Lost	THQ	Winter 2004 ●
Starship Troopers	Empire	Christmas 2004 ●
Star Wars: Republic Commando	Activision	Winter 2004 ●
Sudden Strike 3	GMX	TBA ●
Supremecy: Four Paths To Power	Strategy First	Autumn 2004 ●
Team Fortress 2	Vivendi	TBA ●
The Bard's Tale	Acclaim	October 2004 ●
The Longest Journey 2	Funcom	TBA ●
The Lord of the Rings: Battle for Middle Earth	Electronic Arts	Winter 2004 ●
The Lord of the Rings: Middle-Earth Online	Vivendi	Summer 2004 ●
The Matrix Online	Atari	Spring 2004 ●
The Movies	Activision	2004 ●
The Playboy Mansion	Ubi Soft	TBA ●
The Sims 2	Electronic Arts	Autumn 2004 ●
Thief Eidos	2004	●
Tribes Vengeance	Vivendi	Late 2004 ●
Total Annihilation 2	Phantagram	Autumn 2004 ●
Two Thrones	Strategy First	2004 ●
Universal Combat	Dreamcatcher	February 2004 ●
Unreal Tournament 2004	Atari	March 2004 ●
Unreal Warfare	Atari	TBA ●
Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines	Activision	Autumn 2004 ●
Warhammer Online	Sega	Autumn 2004 ●
World of Warcraft	Vivendi	December 2004 ●
X2: Online Universe	Koch	Spring 2004 ●
X2: The Threat	Koch	February 2004 ●

THIS MONTH IN GAMES

WELCOME TO OUR GENRE-SPECIFIC NEWS SECTION, FEATURING ALL THE MONTH'S HIGHLIGHTS. DIGEST, THEN DROP US AN EMAIL AT **pcga@derwenthoward.com.au** TO HAVE YOUR SAY.

THE MONTH IN FIRST-PERSON SHOOTERS

■ Craig Pearson

I'VE spent the month absorbed in *Quake*. Nope, you haven't accidentally picked up an old magazine. It's a mod that has caught my eye: *Industri*, which shows off the sort of visual tricks

and shadows we'd all have flipped over in last year's full games. And these guys have managed this with original *Quake*, which is, ooh, seven years old now. It's amazing what a few modifications can do. The new stuff adds stencil shadows that allow for realistic shadows on every game object, per-pixel lighting so that all the surface details are lit correctly, high-resolution textures to boost the screen size up to 1600x1200, and bumpmapping to give those textures a nice bobbly look. It's all the stuff that makes *Doom III* look as good as it does, and here it is running on creaky old *Quake*. The plan is to create an entire single-player game. One to keep tabs on.

Warthog jumps. Now that *Halo* has finally reached the PC, it's time to talk about the subculture that sprung up with the original release. It involves positioning a Warthog over a large pile of grenades and setting them off. The force of the explosion, and the playful co-operation of the *Halo* physics engine, can make the Warthog perform spectacular stunts in the air. Find out how to do it with the instructional videos at the Bungie fansite below. Speaking of *Halo*, the mod/hack scene that thrived on the Xbox is now busily twiddling away at the code deep within the belly of Bungie's beast. Amazing what you can do with a simple tweak.

"IT INVOLVES POSITIONING A WARTHOG OVER A PILE OF GRENADES, AND SETTING THEM OFF."

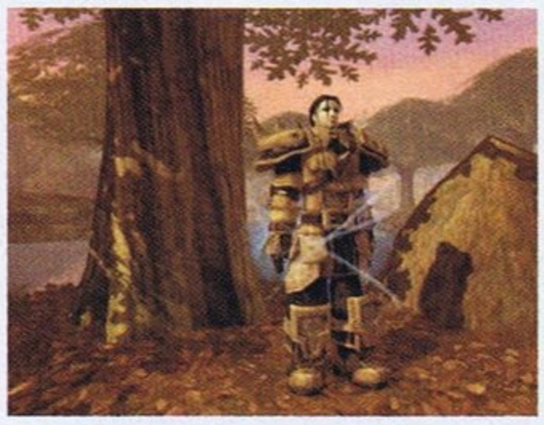
Further Links

halo.bungie.org/misc/warthogjumpmirrors.html
■ Fun with *Halo*'s physics engine.
http://industri.sourceforge.net
■ These guys are modding *Quake* into the next century.

THE MONTH IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

■ Ross Atherton

NEVER say never; that's what we say. Although Microsoft have said in the past that the ambitious and astounding Xbox RPG *Fable* (pictured) will not come to PC, that may not be the case. Peter Molyneux revealed, in an online chat session, that the Lionhead satellite studio Big Black Box are in negotiations with publishers Microsoft to "allow" a PC release. There are no experience points as such in this game, and your character develops and ages according to his or her experiences. If you use lots of magic from the outset, your skills in that area will naturally develop, but your body will weaken – and vice versa if you rely on muscle. Rewards from quests, meanwhile, can be boosted if you boast of your deeds, while your reputation can take a hammering if people hear about your failures. We hope to have news about a PC release soon.



Well, you should all have bought, played and finished *Knights of the Old Republic* by now. Good, innit? Told you so. You should be mildly excited, then, to know that a sequel is rumoured to be in the works at Bioware-supported developer Obsidian, which is fronted by ex-Black Isle chap and level 23 RPG developer Feargus Urquhart. There's been no rejection of these rumours, and in this business a lack of denial is as good as a confirmation. Right?

Meanwhile, your monthly dose of new, obscure RPG: *Kult*, from German developers 3D People. It's good old-fashioned isometric stuff, but more interestingly has recently been renamed from *Cult* to *Kult*. A 'K', it seems, is cooler.

"REWARDS FROM QUESTS, MEANWHILE, CAN BE BOOSTED IF YOU BOAST OF YOUR DEEDS."

Further Links

www.lionhead.co.uk
■ Fingers crossed.
www.cult.3dpeople.de
■ Join the *Kult*.

THE MONTH IN ACTION-ADVENTURE GAMES

■ Tim Edwards

A war of words has errupted between Rockstar and the Haitian-American community after Henry Frank, executive director of the Haitian Centers Council in New York, called for a boycott of *GTA: Vice City*, noticing that it's a bit naughty. "We believe that it was the purposeful intent of Rockstar Games to create a product that was controversial to increase sales," said Henry, before organising a march on downtown Manhattan.

Rockstar's reply was swift. "We empathise with the concerns of the Haitian community and we are giving serious consideration to them. Some statements made by fictional characters in *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* have been taken out of context. There was no intention to offend any ethnic group, and we take these claims very seriously." That led to the inevitable scratching of heads. What context? What statements? Well, the line "Kill all the Haitians", possibly.

While Rockstar were busy mending fences, Revolution, the chaps behind *Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon*, are also co-operating with the community. They've released two of their previous adventures, *Lure of the Temptress* and *Beneath a Steel Sky* under a freeware licence. You'll need the ScummVM emulator to play *Beneath a Steel Sky*, while a fair knowledge of getting DOS games to run under Windows XP is needed for *Lure of the Temptress*.

Sleeping Dragon entered the charts well and only just slightly in the following weeks. If it can keep selling in significant numbers, it may just open doors for other, frustrated adventure designers.

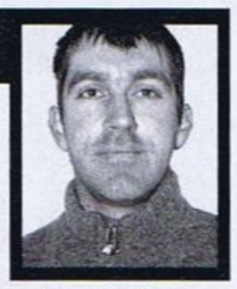
"THERE WAS NO INTENTION TO OFFEND ANY ETHNIC GROUP" SAY ROCKSTAR.

Further Links

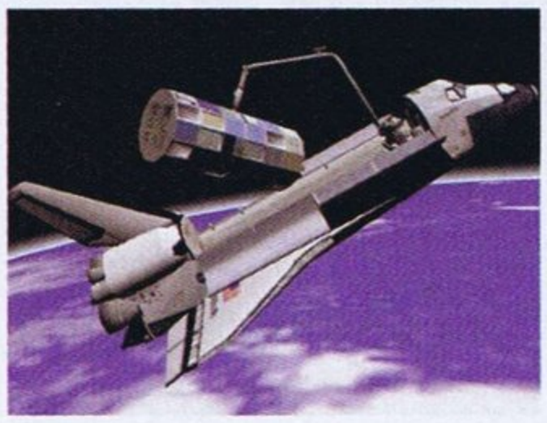
www.haitiancenterscouncil.org
■ Raising money for other worthy causes.
www.revolution.co.uk
■ Abandonware as marketing.

THE MONTH IN SIMULATION GAMES

■ Tim Stone



A Top 100 PC games chart voted for by gamers and published recently had me reaching for the Radiohead and the service revolver, so starved was it of simulation excellence. Particularly distressing was the fact that votes for the Microsoft Flight Simulator games weren't counted, as they were deemed to be something other than 'games'.



The notion that hardcore non-combat vehicle simulations somehow don't qualify as 'games' is as damaging as it is divisive and needs to be stamped on

"LAST MONTH'S TOP 100 HAD ME REACHING FOR THE RADIOHEAD AND THE SERVICE REVOLVER."

before it gains credence. Quite why products that provide so much entertainment to so many, offer engrossing assessed activities and challenges, and provide the kind of huge seamless 3D sandboxes that other genres are only lately beginning to appreciate should be regarded by supposedly broad-minded opinion formers as 'other' will never cease to mystify me.

For example, claiming that the gamer who has put the brilliant *Call of Duty* or *Star Wars: KotOR* aside for an hour or two to play at constructing space stations or recovering satellites courtesy of the recently updated freeware gem *Orbiter* is *not* involved in an 'activity engaged in for diversion or amusement' (my dictionary definition of 'game') is absurd.

Orbiter is no less a game than the extremely promising GT racing sim *GTR* that is to be the first commercial release from talented ex-EA *F1* series modders SimBin, due next summer.

Further Links

www.orbitersim.com
■ Now with prettier planets and more precise physics.
www.simbin.com/games/gtr
■ Prancing horsepower and Porsches galore here.

THE MONTH IN MULTI-PLAYER/ONLINE GAMES

■ Mark Sutherns

THE MMORPG fan is such a fragile creature. Hardly a month goes by without a tale of a vengeful group of gamers expressing discontent at their treatment in their chosen virtual world.

Feeling the heat this month was *Dark Age of Camelot* expansion pack, *Trials of Atlantis*. Legions of players expressed their distaste for a style of play that moved away from the pace of the original game to a slower, *Everquest*-like experience,

"THE WARRIORS OF EVERQUEST THREATEN TO SPAM ALL MAJOR FANTASTY CHAT CHANNELS."

with little guidance offered on the many puzzles. With crowds of protesters gathering at the gates of Mythic's forums, Producer Matt Firor braved the line of fire to issue his thoughts on the reaction to the game in which he acknowledged the frustration with "specific encounters, the lack of information about the content of the expansion and with bugs". You've got to admire their honesty and our money's on Mythic putting things right by the time the next free expansion, a realm vs realm add-on, sees the light of day.

Mythic might have quelled the revolt but over on the *Everquest* servers it seems the revolution is well underway. Sony having recently hit the Warrior class with a number of significant changes that have, in the opinion of many players, radically reduced their enjoyment of the game, the players are hitting back. The Warriors of Everquest have threatened to spam all major chat channels throughout the fantasy world with their angry objections. It seems to have worked – developers Sony have scheduled an overhaul of 'melee combat systems'. Power to the people.

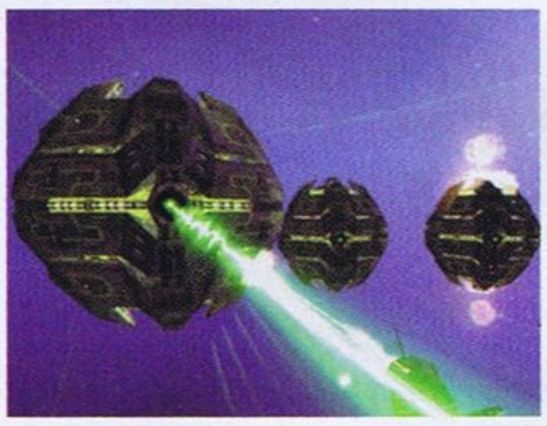
Further Links

www.ukterrorist.com
■ Check here for the latest on TAG's *Counter-Strike* team.
http://matrix.ogaming.com
■ Hot news on *Matrix Online*.

THE MONTH IN STRATEGY GAMES

■ Mark Donald

THERE are stars in our strategy eyes this month as news emerges of *Galactic Civilisation* expansionism. *The Altarian Prophecy* foretells of a new campaign of cosmic conquest centred upon the mysterious humanoids that first appeared in the mother game. Also augured are two previously unsuspected alien races: The Dominion Of The Korx and The Drath. Our tea-leaves further speak of a brand new editorial suite. This powerful tool will enable masters of the universe to design custom maps, scenarios and campaigns. *The Altarian Prophecy* can be downloaded straight from developers Stardock for $US20 from February. It's also worth pointing your battleship at www.joeuser.com/index.asp?AID=1644.



GalCiv bossman Brad Wardell hints at a sequel and speaks plainly about the hells of present-day PC games development.

Still in space, our flapping radar has picked up signals from Durandel about his *Onslaught Homeworld* mod. *Onslaught*

"*ONSLAUGHT* RAISES AN ENTIRELY NEW SPACE FLEET FROM *HOMEWORLD'S* UNFLYABLE SHIPS."

raises an entirely new space fleet from the unflyable ships that guest in the *Homeworld* and *Cataclysm* single-player campaigns. This strange alliance features the Kadesh, the Ghostship, the Derelicts, Nomad Moon, JunkYardDawg and co.

Back down to Earth, and the good news is that Nival have announced *Blitzkrieg 2*. WWII real-time tactics are again the order of the day, and in the finest of sequel traditions there will be a new graphics engine and hundreds of new units. Of course.

Further Links

www.galciv.com
■ For more on the game that shoed *MOO*, go here.
www.dreamlauncher.co.uk/onslaught
■ Home of *Homeworld Onslaught*.

THE INSIDER

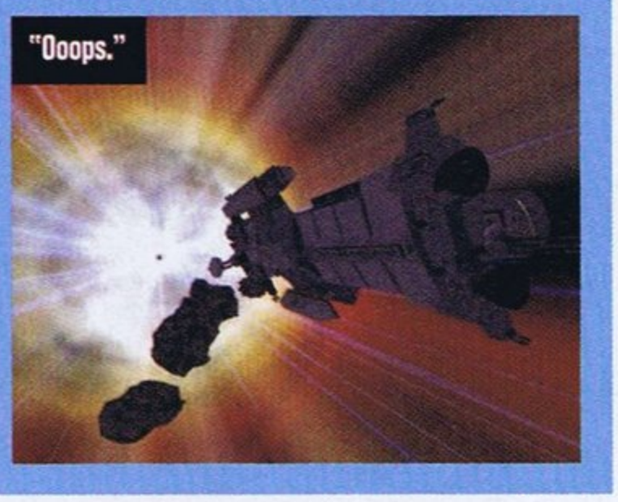
CRACK DOWNS, SHUT DOWNS AND RESURRECTIONS.

The games industry in Thailand continues to suffer at the hands of their government. As you may have read in previous news items the Thai Authorities have introduced a 10pm curfew on all under 18s playing online games, a reaction to the huge success of *Ragnorak* online which this month clocked up 750,000 subscribers. Despite the success developers AsiSoft aren't happy and clearly face an uphill battle. The Thai government justify their act against with extraordinary claims that parents had little time to monitor their children.

According to Dr Surapong Suebwonglee, the Thai Minister for IT, "parents who have teenage children must work very hard and work until very late at night so they don't have the time to look after their children properly". Hmm. Quite.

Also suffering is *Rubies of Eventide*. The game which offered a free trial to gamers just a few months ago is now facing closure. With less than 1,000 paying subscribers it appears the fantasy role-player won't see 2004, the first significant victim of a bloated genre.

Still, it was good to see *Galaxy Andromeda*, formerly known as *Imperium Galactica III*, rescued from the wreckage of CDV. Picked up by Dutch publishers HD Interactive, it will be released under yet another new name: *Nexus*.


"Ooops."

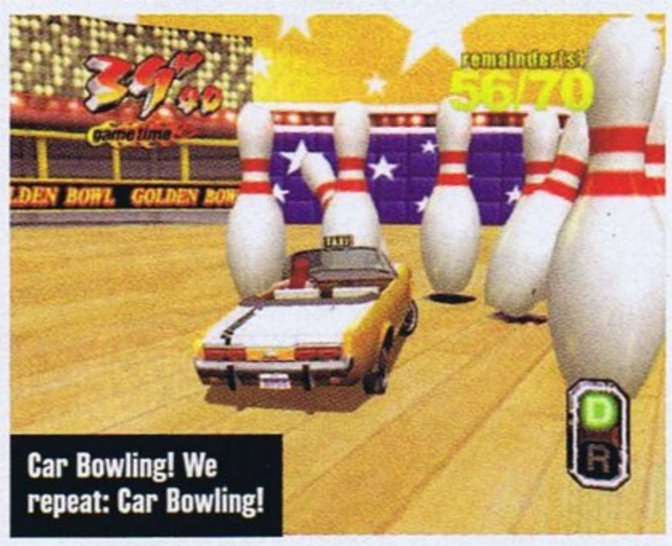
CRAZY TAXI 3 HIGH ROLLERS

"Y'know, I had that Gordon Freeman in my cab just the other day."

By CRAIG PEARSON

As you can see, this game takes more liberties with physics than Prof. Hawking.

A UFO smashing sub-game. Hit them all as hard as you can.



Car Bowling! We repeat: Car Bowling!

CRAZY TAXI 3 AT A GLANCE

Publisher: Empire Interactive

Developer: Strangelite

Genre: Arcade Racing

Estimated Minimum System: PIII 700, 256Mb RAM, 32Mb 3D card

Contact: www.empire interactive.com

Release Date: Summer 2004

What's in it for you? Non-serious car screeching fun.

THINGS that call themselves 'crazy' are usually desperate creatures. The uncle with a spinning bowtie, the wacky workmate that thinks musical cookie jars are funny. But in the ultra serious world of the driving sim, *Crazy Taxi 3* sticks out. That aforementioned uncle? He's riding face first on the window screen, begging to get off, bowtie battering against his flabby neck. It really is *that* crazy.

First things first: it's an arcade driving game, where you ferry fares all over town. The more fares you deliver on time, the more money you earn. That's it, really. A simpler game there never was. But simple doesn't necessarily mean bad. Okay, so the driving model will never be held up against the *TOCA* type, but then it's not supposed to be. It's been streamlined all the way down to seven buttons, with the most complex controls being the special moves. It's not meant to appeal to the crowd of Top Gear mullets who salivate over engine torque. *Crazy Taxi 3* couldn't even spell 'torque', never mind take it into consideration. This game is all about twisting and turning your way through packed cities and truly bizarre sub-games.

Currently each taxi handles like it's on rails, turning inertia-free right angles in the hairiest of situations. This won't change in the final release because you'll need such dodge skills when you're encouraged to go headfirst into traffic, off-road or over anything sloped. The goal is to get the fare to their destination in time; nothing else matters. How you do it is pretty much up to you. There's an arrow above you suggesting a suitable route to your destination, but the number of shortcuts you can take is mindboggling. Follow the arrow if you're in a safe mood; or work your own way there, over, under, along the side. It all depends on how much time you have left, and your imagination.

In no way is this game a tactical masterpiece, but the decisions you make will affect your overall score. You can pick up groups of passengers for more cash, but the big money will have you scooting all over town in every direction. Single fares give you just one destination at a time to worry about, usually the better choice when your time's counting down and close to zero.

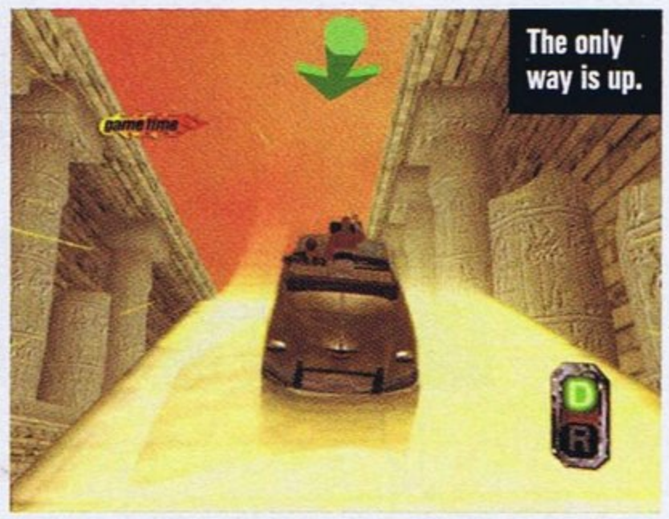
"*CRAZY TAXI 3* COULDN'T EVEN SPELL 'TORQUE', LET ALONE TAKE IT INTO CONSIDERATION."

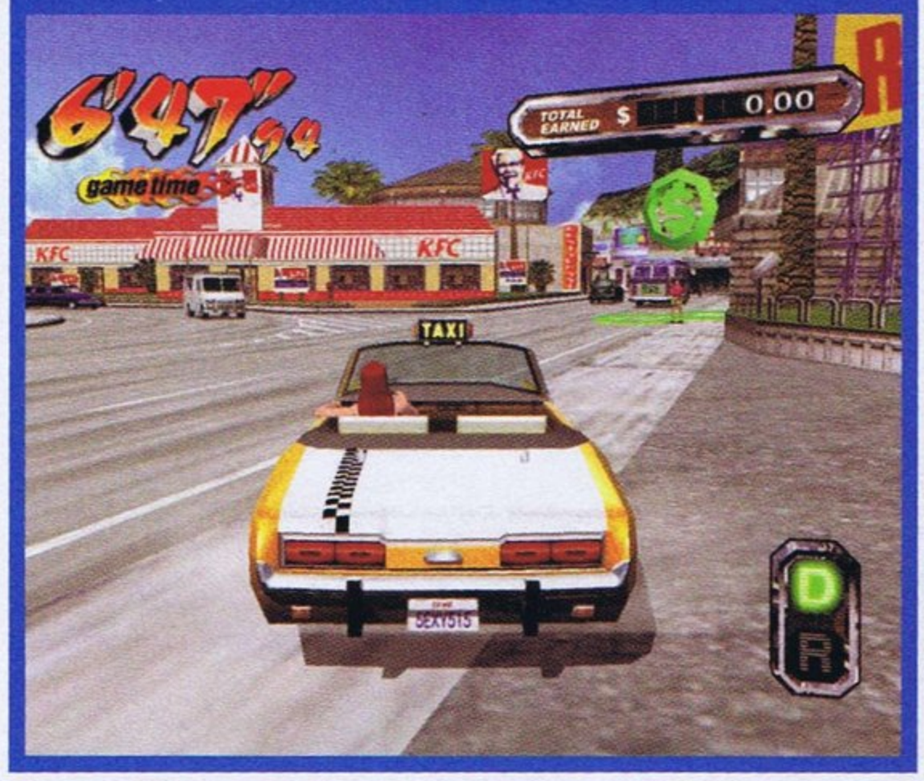
To extend the game's life beyond its coin-op origins, the taxi is souped-up with a number of additional moves. The 'handiest' is the Crazy Hop. It's a helpful corner-cutter that'll enables you to scrape the roof of an oncoming bus with a single button press. There's the addition of the Crazy Dash that'll hurl you into high-speed

A WORD FROM OUR SPONSORS

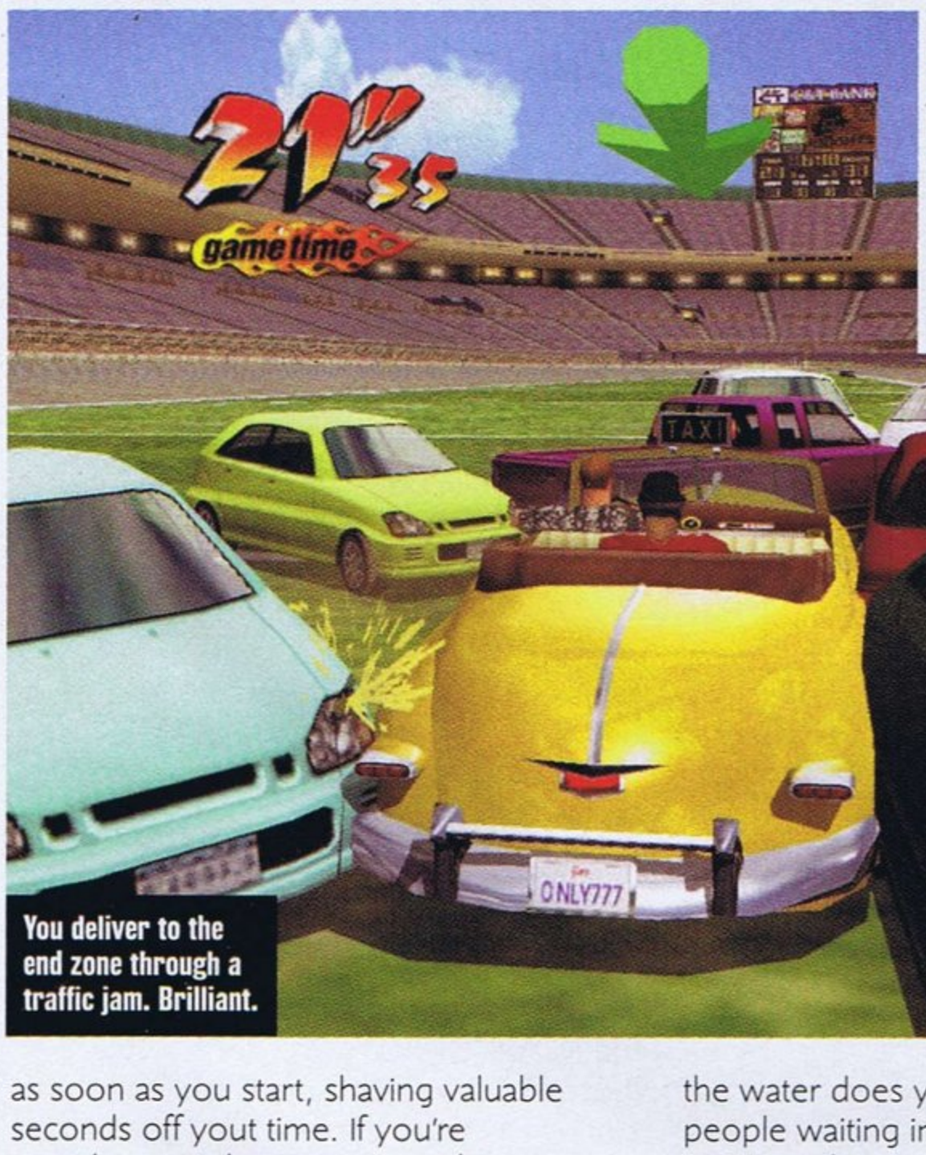
Sometimes you play games to escape the real world, and you can't blame people who'd buy *Crazy Taxi 3: High Rollers* to do just that. Word of warning, however. You'll find a disturbing reminder of reality in the advertising. In among the pseudo-shops there's a troubling tendency for real names and logos to creep into your fare destinations, as well as unmissable adverts that pop up as you drive around. Whether it has any effect is another matter. Are you really going to stop playing and taxi off into town for some fried chicken?

Ah, it's the ever useful bumper cam.





Shortcuts cut time, but the routes are often civilian-endangering.



You deliver to the end zone through a traffic jam. Brilliant.

The Crazy Slide throws the car right into corners.

as soon as you start, shaving valuable seconds off yout time. If you're overshooting the target area, there's a reverse function that'll stop you dead, and the nifty Crazy Drift that'll score tyre marks into the ground.

It's often best to leave the road and find a quicker route. And when I say 'leave the road' I don't simply mean cutting corners over a grassy triangle. I mean hammering through a mall a la Blues Brothers. Or perhaps leaping straight over the top of an oncoming bus. Or through one end of a multi-storey car park and out the other. And when you think you've done everything.the game can throw at you, you end up jumping from the sloped hills of the West Coast right onto the buildings. Even landing in the water does you no harm: there are people waiting in the river, and you just carry on driving along the bottom.

The mini-games add an extra surreal dimension to the game, displaying the sort of insane ingenuity that Sega, creators of the original console game, are renowned for. Witness the game of football, where you and the fare start at one end of an NFL field and have to tear your way through hordes of onrushing cars to score a 'touchdown'. Even better is the Twister pastiche: there's a tornado chucking cars around like the devil's croupier.You have to dodge the reigning motors as they fall, then deliver the fare to the end section.

The.graphics are a chunky, toylike affair, but with the neon, the clear blue water fringing the edges of the West Coast, and the sepia tint that progressively bleeds day into night, they hit the anarchic arcade tone correctly. The action moves along at a fair lick as well, and the night scenes, with their smeared car lights, are wonderfully evocative. Nevetheless the character models are starting to show their age. A little bit more work prettying them up wouldn't go amiss.

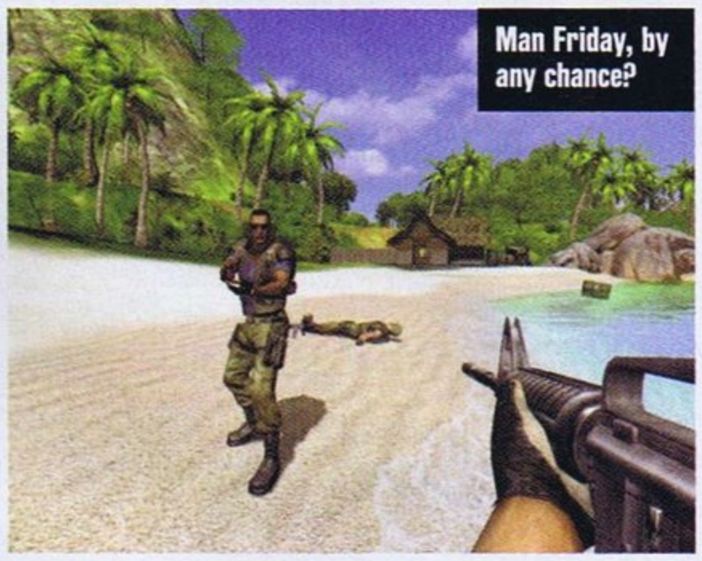
Scepticism suggests that we shouldn't get too excited about a year-old Xbox port. Even *Halo* was met with a certain amount of apathy, but there's not a lot like *Crazy Taxi* currently on the PC. We're hoping the oddly thrilling highs will offset the obvious shallowness of the various lows, but the ultimate decision will be made in a forthcoming issue.

FAR CRY

With only a couple of months to go, it's getting to be a very near cry.

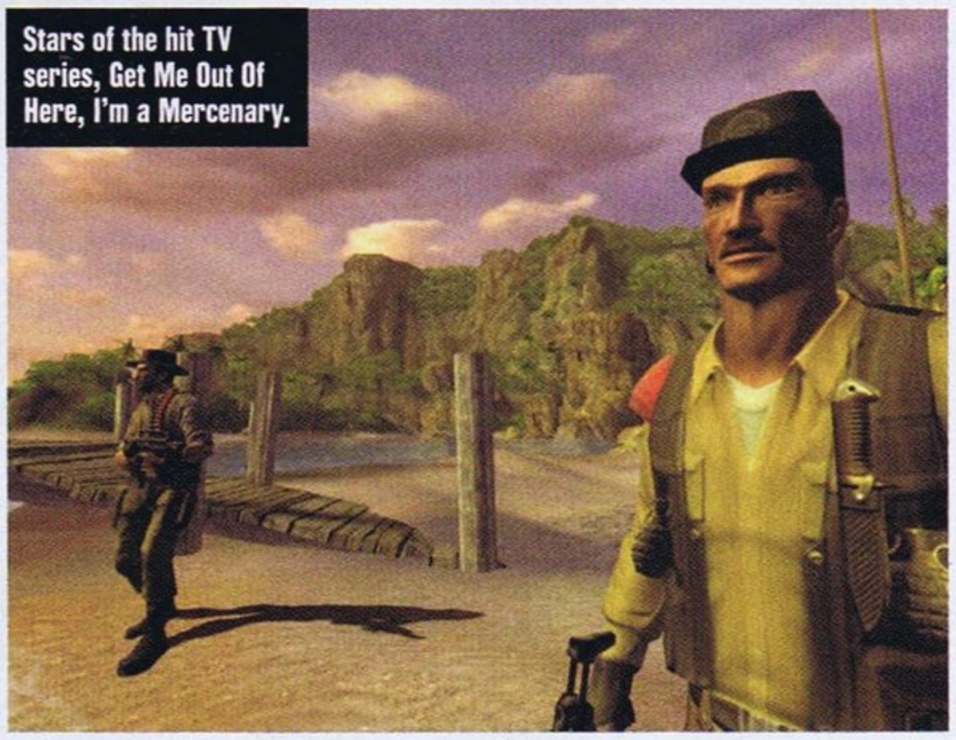
By CHRIS BUXTON

Jousting in jeeps with mounted guns promises to be fun.



Man Friday, by any chance?

These in-car barbecues are marvellous.



Stars of the hit TV series, Get Me Out Of Here, I'm a Mercenary.

FAR CRY AT A GLANCE

Publisher: Ubi Soft

Developer: Crytek

Genre: First-person shooter

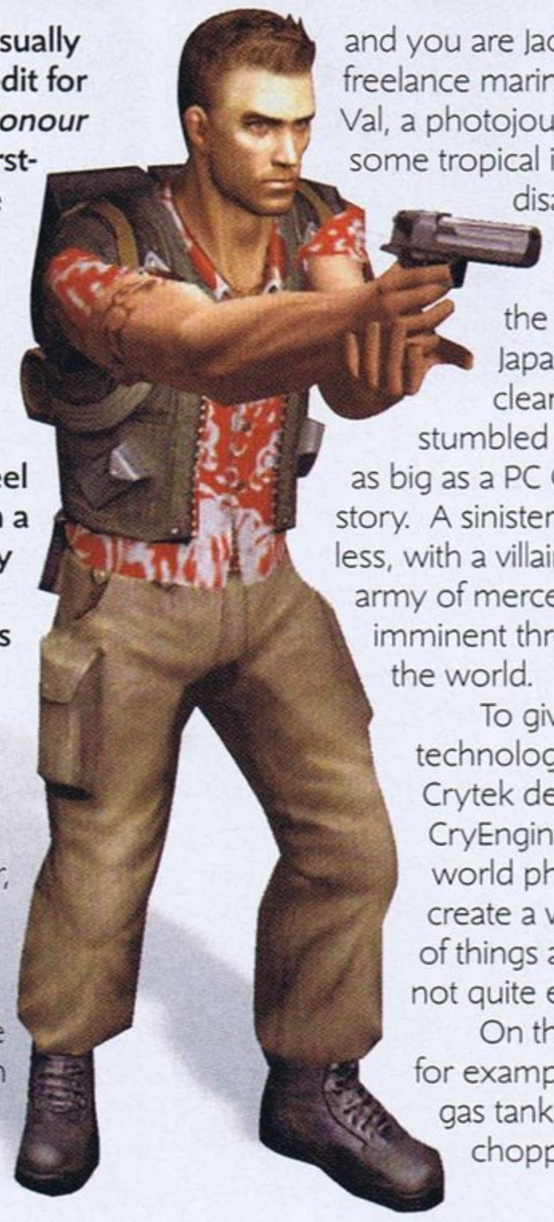
Estimated Minimum System: PIII 800, GeForce, 256Mb RAM

Contact: www.crytek.com

Release Date: Autumn 2004

What's in it for you? First-person action that's low on corridors and scripts, high on clever foes and giving you the initiative.

BLAME *Half-Life*, it usually takes the credit for everything. Or blame *Medal of Honour* and that beach landing. For the first-person shooter has, thanks to the more memorable moments of these masterpieces, relied increasingly on the spectacular set-piece to parlay its craft. And while the impressive use of scripting has made all our lives richer, it can also make a player feel less a gamer and more an actor in a movie. A movie with a particularly arsey director who doesn't take kindly to someone taking liberties with his screenplay.



Liberty, however, is precisely what *Far Cry* wants to give us. The wide open spaces of the tropical island setting contrast wildly with what most conventional FPS's offer, and the entire game is seemingly conceived to give the player as much freedom as possible to achieve their objectives. And those objectives? Still largely shrouded in mystery, as it happens. What is known is that it's the near future and you are Jack Carver, a freelance mariner hired to ferry Val, a photojournalist, around some tropical islands. When Val disappears and Carver wakes up tied to a chair in the wreck of a Japanese carrier, it's clear that the journo's stumbled onto something as big as a PC GAMER lead news story. A sinister conspiracy, no less, with a villain protected by an army of mercenaries and an imminent threat to the safety of the world.

To give them the technology to do all this, Crytek developed their CryEngine, which uses real world physics to help create a world where a lot of things are possible – if not quite everything.

On the training level, for example, there's a huge gas tank that can be chopped free of its stand and sent rolling down a hill to crush unsuspecting guards. It's a small demonstration of a much wider principle at work in *Far Cry*. "It's very important to us that we introduce non-linear ways of completing a mission," says Crytek's Jack Manais, designer of *Far Cry*'s single-player game. And one of the ways that *Far Cry* sets out to capture this gaming grail is through the AI of its enemies, who don't, unlike those of many an FPS, open up with pinpoint accuracy the moment you're seen.

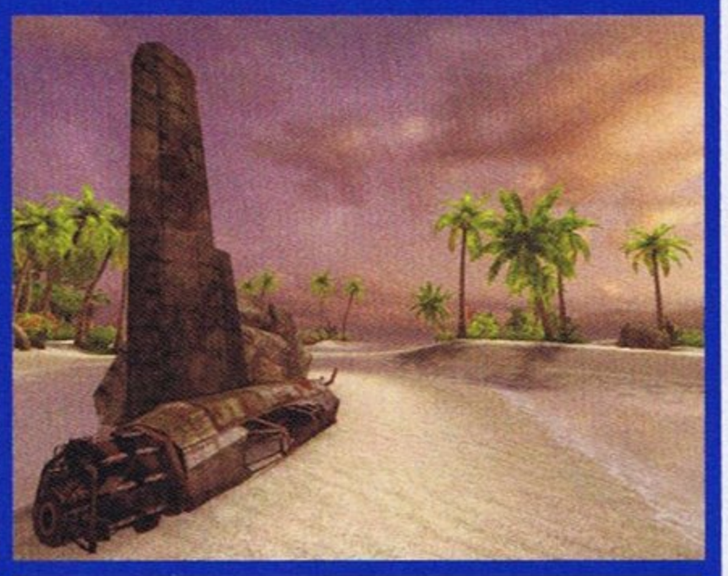
"The enemies aren't automatically smart," explains Manais. "They'll look around for the player, adopt tactics and form groups to find him." To wit, you can stay in cover and, say, throw a rock, making a guard look in the direction of the sound. But the enemy aren't stupid: "They're smart about using their environments and getting cover behind them," says Manais. "The AI will try to use cover to stay safe and then try to overwhelm the player."

Mostly it works too. In one particularly memorable firefight, I engaged a shady looking band of goons and scientists across a tropical river. I peppered them with missile fire and watched all hell break loose as the bad guys scattered and poison gas leaked

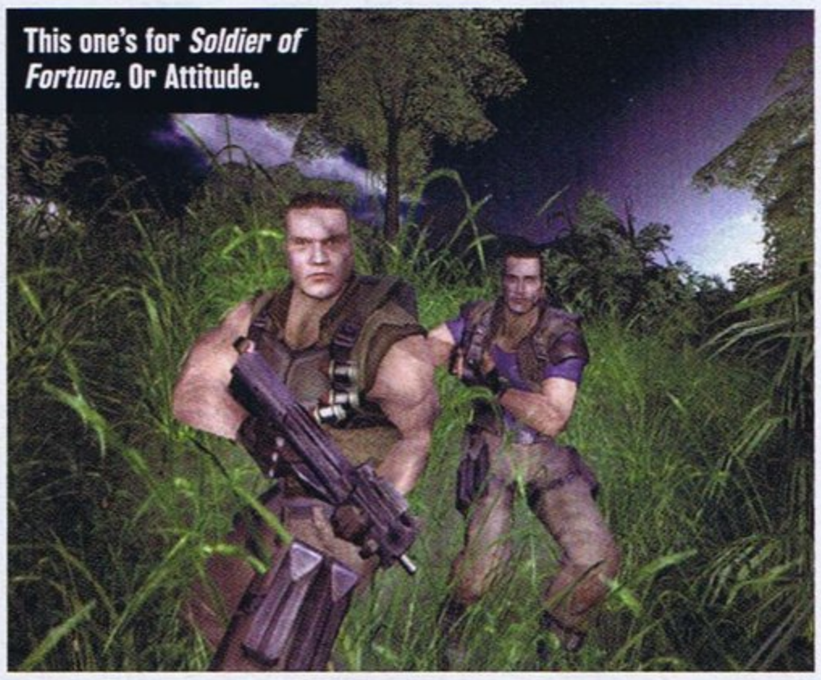
FULL OF POTENTIAL...

...is how we'd describe *Far Cry* multi-player. The CryEngine's sandbox tool is simplicity itself to use, it's been built from the ground up with realtime editing in mind, and all the single-player weapons, five vehicles and special weather conditions of six unique maps are included.

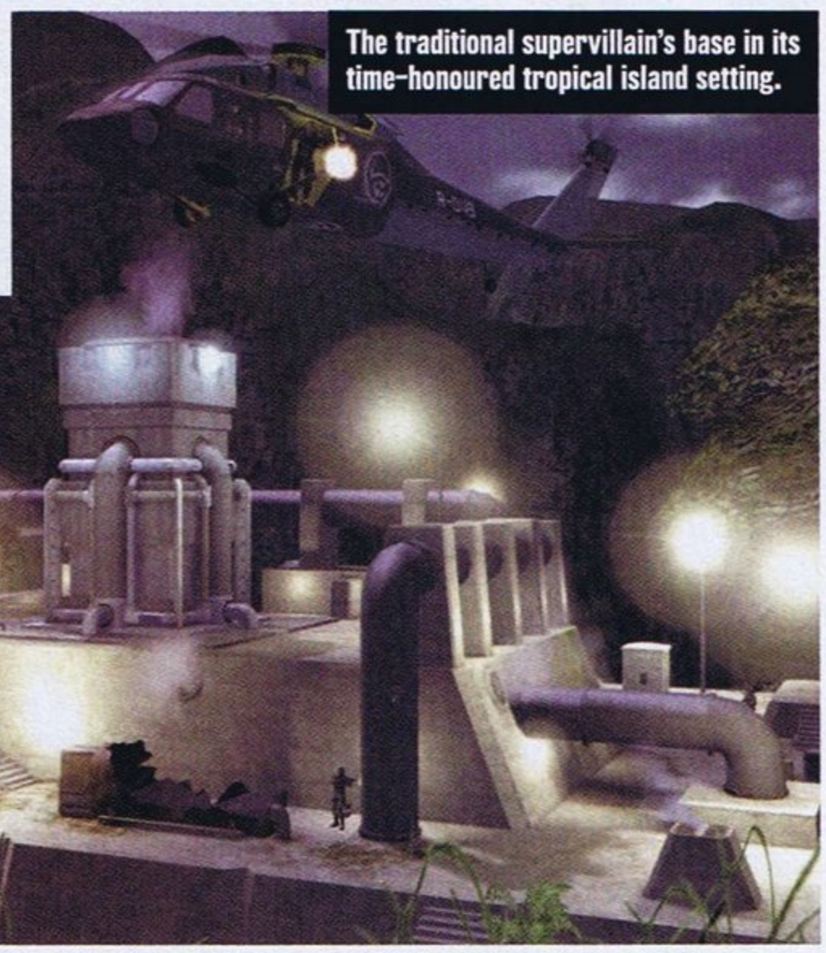
Monkey Bay is one of the deathmatch maps, and while lacking in monkeys, in this pre-release version there is a monkey statue you can make fart fire. Coders, eh?



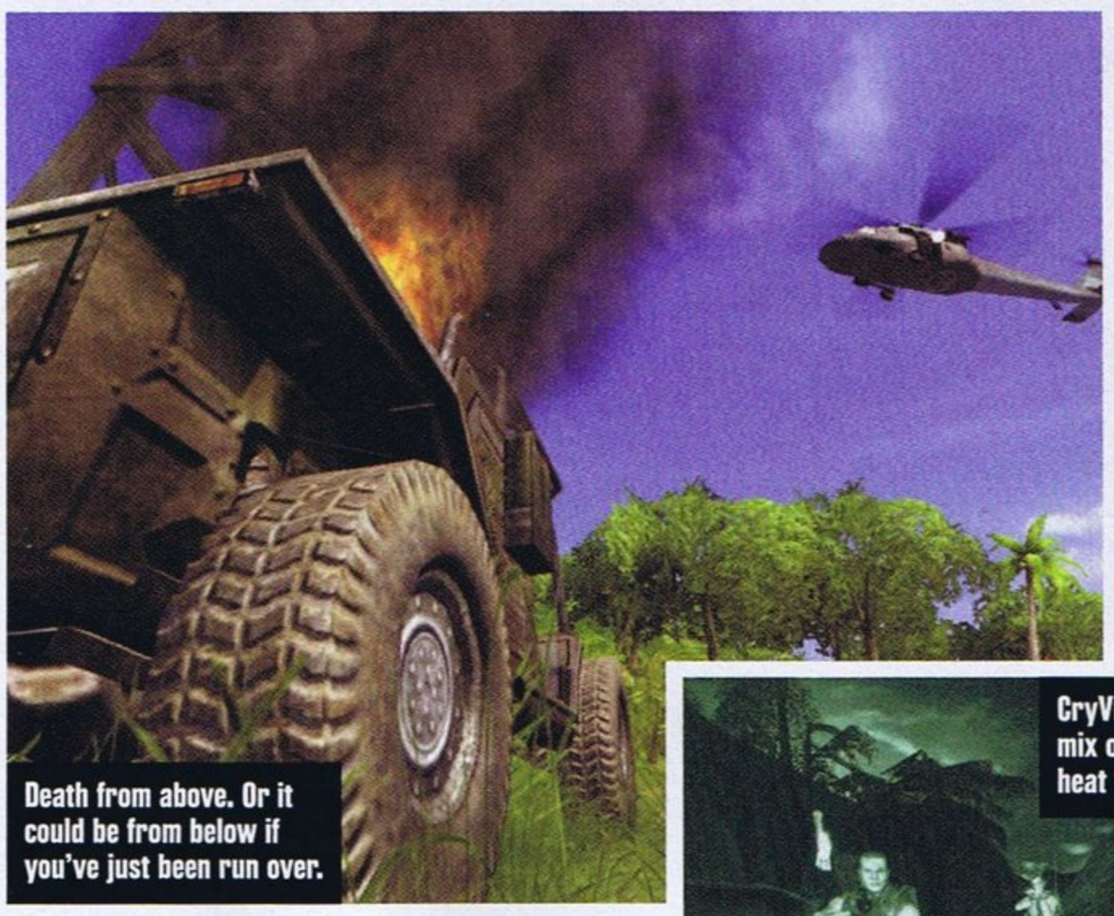
The Dune map is littered with Japanese World War II relics, which nicely spice up the rather abstemious diet of sea, sand and palm trees.



This one's for *Soldier of Fortune.* Or Attitude.

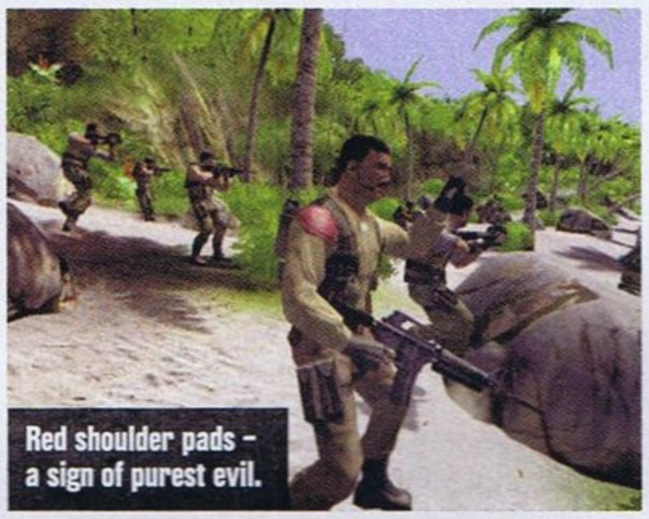


The traditional supervillain's base in its time-honoured tropical island setting.



Death from above. Or it could be from below if you've just been run over.

CryVision goggles – a mix of night vision and heat vision technology.



Red shoulder pads – a sign of purest evil.

from their dubious-looking experiments. Assuming I was safe across the river, I kept launching the fireworks until – *crack* – my man was eliminated by a single shot to the skull. Unseen, one of the guards had worked his way across the river, homed in my position and clinically took me out. Not that the AI works perfectly everytime, but Crytek are working to fix the anomalies.

Pushing yet further the game's non-linear credentials, Crytek intend *Far Cry* to be as playable as an action gamer as it will be a steath-'em-up. But while it's certainly possible to tear through the game with all guns blazing, more covert Carvers will want to survey a location from a click away with their binoculars, and plan their assault in clinical fashion. And taking the trouble to spy on the enemy going about his daily business will yield its own dividend, as Manais explains. "You may find out they've got some hidden cache of weapons over there, you may find a secret way around, you may find out who this guy on the island is. The stealth player's going to get more information and that's his reward for playing that way. The action guy will still hit the base objectives but won't get as rich an exploring experience."

"TAKING THE TROUBLE TO SPY ON THE ENEMY WILL YIELD IT'S OWN DIVIDEND..."

Of course, a key weapon in a stealthy arsenal is the sniper rifle, but so as not to skew *Far Cry* too far in that direction, Crytek have made sniping considerably more difficult than it is in other FPS's. Try taking someone out at the extreme limits of your rifle's range and you'll find the scope shakes wildly. And if you do start sniping, don't expect to be able to camp somewhere and casually pick off targets, for reasons Manais explains. "Snipers are the deadliest tool in the army – they are surgical strikes on enemy personnel. As soon as a sniper appears in the real world, they either get bombarded by artillery, they send search parties out with dogs, or send helicopters to kill you. Our way, we send in reinforcements, which can be helicopters, jeeps, whatever, to hunt you out."

Action or stealth? In *Far Cry*, the choice will be yours, with Crytek adding that around 90% of the 100 or so action bubbles that structure the game have alternate routes for the player to discover. Whether something offering such an open approach can compete with titles serving up bespoke action or stealth remains to be seen. However, with its real world physics, its inventive island setting and its unusually AI-heavy gameplay, Crytek's first venture certainly can't be accused of rehashing the same old FPS material.

TALKING IN CODE

We talked to designer Jack Manais from a long way off, while weeping.

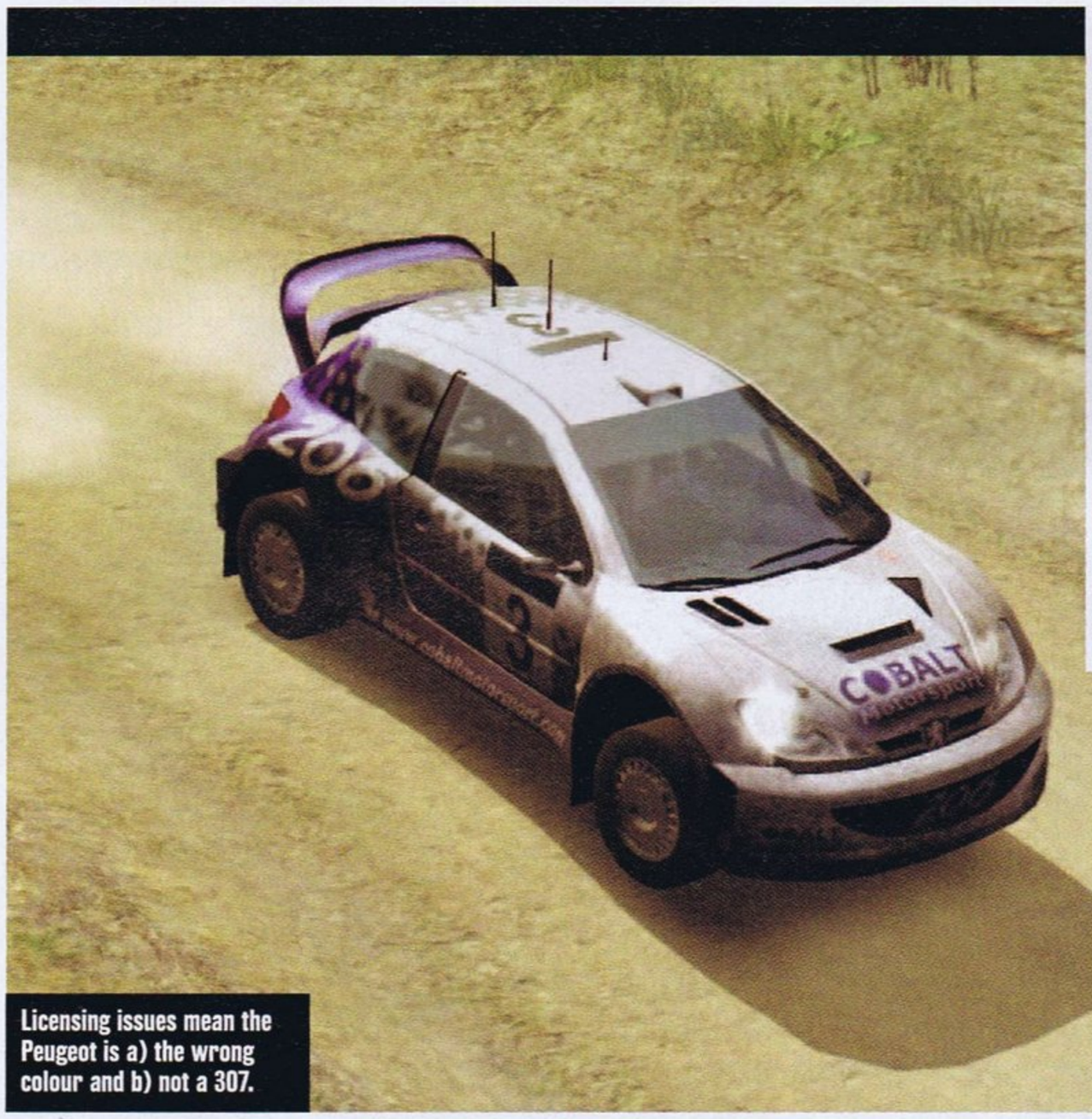
PCGA: Why should we be excited about *Far Cry*?
Because it's a revolution in game design... It has integrated physics gameplay which, with smart, adaptive AI means that almost all of the missions are infinitely replayable.

PCGA: What feature are you most proud of?
Probably the physics gameplay, because I really like doing things like rolling barrels over enemies. I haven't been able to do stuff like that in games before. And coming up with those puzzles was fun and exciting."

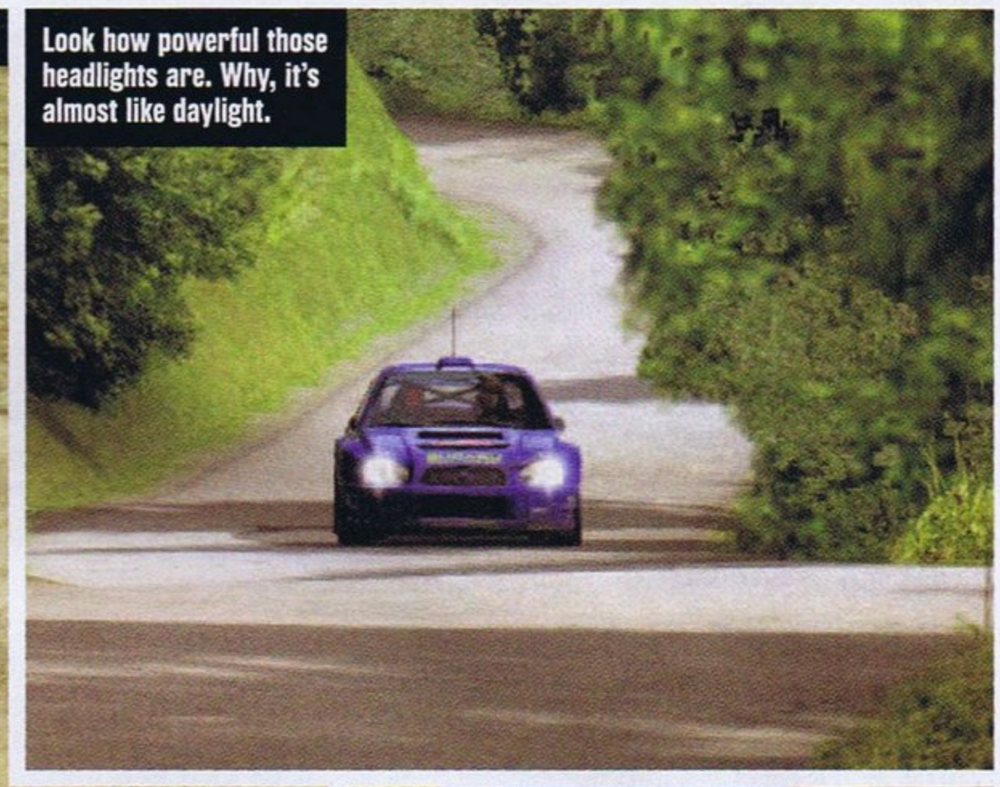
RICHARD BURNS RALLY

This might not be news, but Dick Burns and computers go hand in hand...

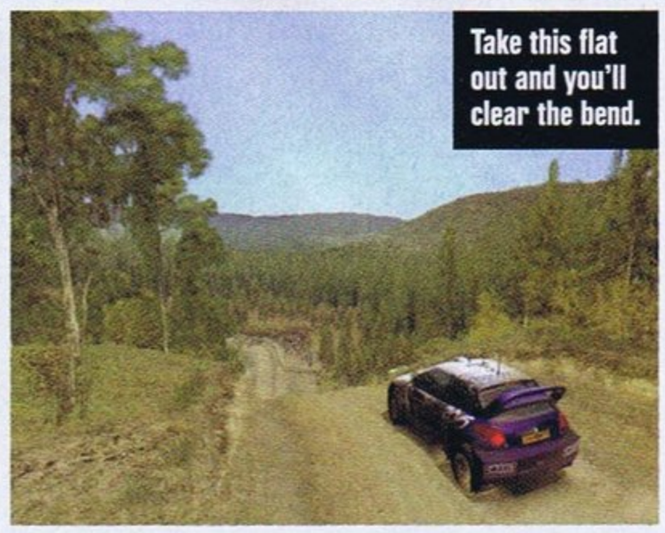
BY STEVEN WILLIAMS



Licensing issues mean the Peugeot is a) the wrong colour and b) not a 307.



Look how powerful those headlights are. Why, it's almost like daylight.



Take this flat out and you'll clear the bend.

RICHARD BURNS RALLY AT A GLANCE

Publisher: SCi

Developer: Warthog

Genre: Rallying

Estimated Minimum System: PIII 800, 128Mb RAM, GeForce 2

Contact: www.richardburnsrally.com

Release Date: March 2004

What's in it for you? Beautifully, insanely authentic rally recreation, with tuition from a genuine world champion. It's also scary fast.

THINK you can drive a World Rally car? You can't. If scouring across dirt just a splinter's width from giant redwood trees, mountains and the scythe of Death is your thing, chances are you'll have been playing the *Colin McRae* series for some time. You may even have played the sensationally unforgiving *Rally Championship* before that. But you still can't drive a World Rally car.

If your tastes ever creep from the forests and onto tarmac you'll be familiar with *Grand Prix Legends*, the 1967 GP sim still lurking in our Top 100 after five years on the shelves. This game is famously hard, requiring not so much gaming skill as monumental car control – and this is where *Richard Burns Rally* is going in relation to other rally titles. There are plenty of other rally games, just as there are F1 games, but none are so detailed, so faithful or so give-me-the-key-to-the-bell-tower hard.

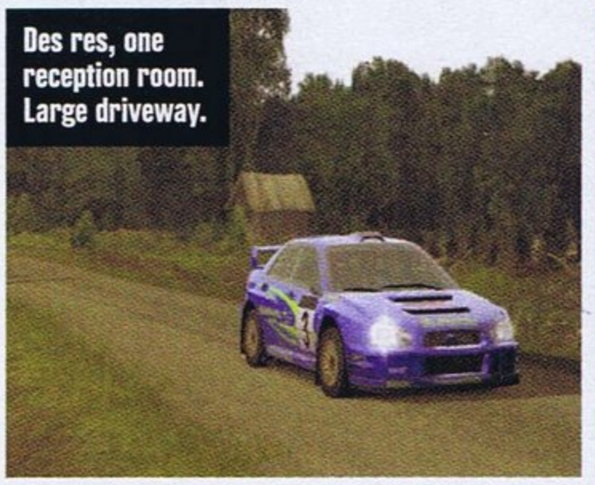
You might think that doesn't bode well, but you'd be wrong; this is porno for petrolheads. Even at this relatively early stage it's clear the game's going to be fun, something the otherwise mighty *GPL* didn't always manage. What's the difference? A 2003 World Rally Car is easier to drive than a 1967 GP car. And we know that because *RBR*, as far as is humanly possible, doesn't cheat. Warthog have modelled the attributes of the cars to an almost autistic degree.

Buckle in, baby, here comes a for-instance. For instance, each wheel is modelled with its own mass, so when the car hits say, a pothole, the wheel arcs from the leading edge and smacks straight into the upslope on the other side. Recoiling on virtual McPherson struts, the wheel is fired into the air. Obviously this has a dramatic effect on the car – far more than in many other games, where wheels slavishly follow the surface. And before you write this off as an onanistic designer's head-trip, think about it – authentic wheel movement means changes to dampers, cambers and springs (and even suspension design) are also authentic. What's more, because the game calculates the wheel's courses in relation to the angle you've put them at, under- and oversteer occurs in a 'real' way. Basically, it acts like a real car sliding on gravel. It's about now you realise that no, you can't drive a World Rally car.

"YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO LEARN TO DEAL WITH RUTS, BECAUSE THIS GAME HAS THEM."

But you can learn. And Richard 'I can't drive this car' Burns is on hand with his own rally school, the Forest Xperience. Fortunately when he said couldn't drive he was talking about the Peugeot 206, and the main car here is the Subaru Impreza – Burns was set to rejoin them, though a brain tumour means he'll now sit out 2004. Don't think the school's just a run-through of the controls, either. Burnsie has voiced all manner of advanced-technique lessons, from the Scandinavian Flick (not a hairstyle) to the use of the handbrake, and has even recorded ghost car runs. Even better, he's recorded ghosts at full chat on his favourite stages for a dedicated challenge mode, and Robert Reid, his co-driver, chips in with pace note advice. Interesting fact: Reid habitually carries four watches. Maybe SCi should put him in charge of the release date.

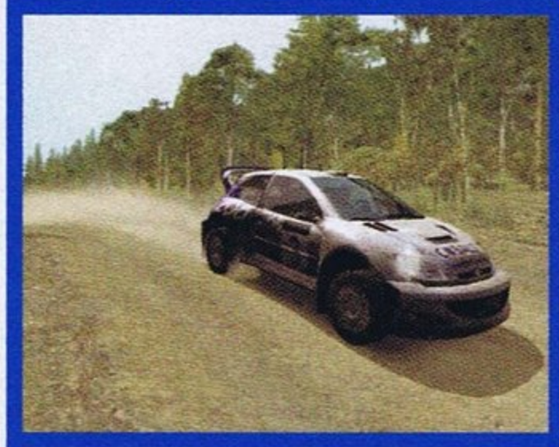
Burnsie also teaches you about surfaces, as *RBR*'s stages are as detailed as its cars. First you're going to have to learn to deal with ruts, because this game actually has them, and then you're going to learn to use them to your advantage. Meanwhile rainfall gradually creates puddles in them, leading to aquaplaning, loss of control, palpitations and death. Don't believe us? *Richard Burns Rally* is the scariest driving



Des res, one reception room. Large driveway.

WRETCHED BRAINS RALLY

Burns may not be driving next season for real, but Warthog continue to make their game feel as for-real as possible. Mostly by being as clever as possible. But they're also including a lot of stuff that other games have strangely ignored so far.



So dynamic are the surfaces that earlier-starting cars sweep away the top layer of gravel, exposing a grippier line beneath.

Go off and you don't respawn – you'll have to wait for spectators to push you out. Big crashes mean helivac and retirement.

Burns hasn't just lent his name, he's played the game and given feedback. So expect bar-raising driving authenticity.

The murdered vehicle was soon cordoned off by the police.

A blue car on a brown road. Yesterday.

Suspension differences mean the Lancer should feel very different.

The Subaru remains the main car, despite Burns' 2004 absence.

game we've ever played. Even console blinder *Burnout 2* can't compete for sheer "I want to press the throttle but my foot won't do it" nervousness. The sense of speed and, unusually, savage acceleration is palpable. We haven't spent this long on part-throttle since *Grand Prix Legends*. Or was it the Pacific Highway? Hmm.

Even when getting on the brakes you're entering a world of fine control way beyond mere slowing down. The NASA-clever electronic differentials of the real thing have been (surprise) pedantically modelled, meaning left-foot braking – against an open throttle – switches to an alternate diff map. Stay with us on this. This map creates an entirely different response, one far more suited to adjusting the angle of the car than throw-the-anchor-out stopping, and you can feel it. Every value can also be changed to tune its behaviour, though to be fair, all but the fiercest rally fan will run shrieking from such complexity. Happily, each event has several default set ups (for all settings, not just diffs), including Burns' choice and the tyre makers' recommended setups. Yes, even the brand characteristics have been recreated, right down to how much energy is dissipated as heat and how much as wear. Bloody hell.

Servicing can also be left to the game if you can't be bothered, and will occur according to the team manager's characteristics (whether he's tight with cash, wants the fastest car, wants to play safe etc). You should be getting the idea that *Richard Burns Rally* is pretty deep by now. Segue: as are some of those puddles. Weather conditions are random, meaning a new season will always be different from the one before. And damage goes way beyond mere cosmetics – even the combustion cycle, coolant flow and exhaust pressure are modelled, so scrappy driving brings pain. Smack the radiator into a rock and the loss of cooling brings overheating; crumple the exhaust and you'll lose power; bend a track rod and the steering goes cross-eyed.

RBR will probably baffle the uninitiated, so we'll see just how successful that rally school is. Indeed one games journalist at a recent event fishtailed into a spin within 100 yards of the start. On a straight. But even as the tears rolled down his cheeks, he restarted the car, reversed and bravely drove off again, this time into a tree. Yet underneath the sobbing was a kind of joy. Petrolheads rejoice. If *Richard Burns Rally* lives up to its early promise, it's going to teach you how to drive a World Rally car.

TALKING IN CODE

Digging the dirt with Peter Hickman

PCGA: Why should we be excited?
Because *RBR* offers something different. We're not trying to copy what's come before.

PCGA: So what are you most proud of?
Maybe the rally school. How much would you pay in real life to be taught to drive by world champion? And I love the moving spectators. It's so much more dynamic. It's about fun, and people want to have fun.

PCGA: What's the hardest thing about making a rally game?
Probably the R&D trips! Rallies rarely take place in great weather. On the Pirelli International it was minus five, foggy and raining. And we had to get up at 7am. Then on the Arctic rally it was minus 35. And of course, we had a big crash in the USA, rolled our 4x4 off the Grand Canyon...

PCGA: Right off the top?
Fortunately not. But it's all on video.

PCGA: So will Richard beat Solberg?
Oooh, that's a good question... [pause] of course he will! [D'oh!]

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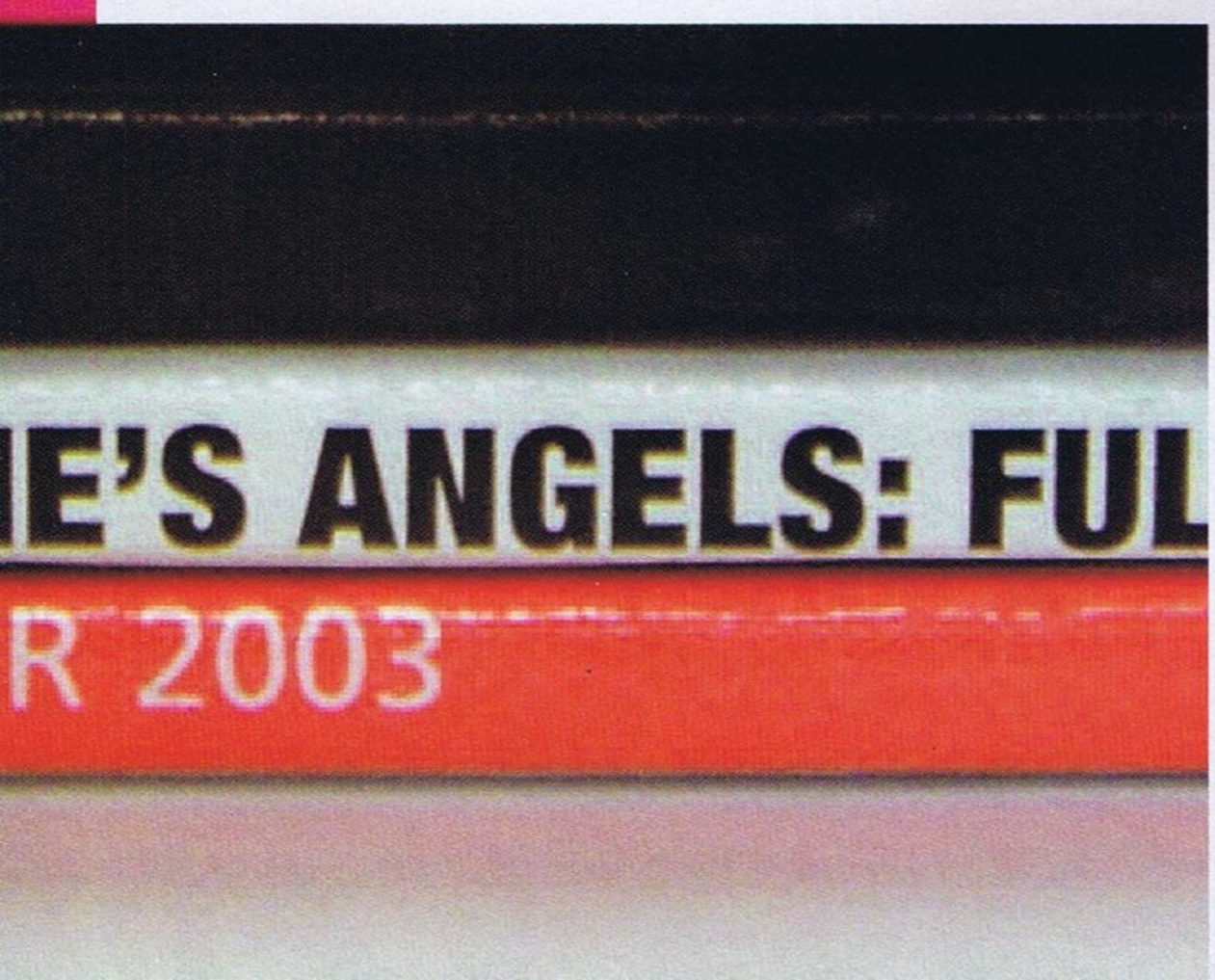


WORLD EXCLUSIVE!

JOINT OPERATIONS TYPHOON RISING

There's a tropical storm heading our way. Outlook: noisy, with lots of gunfire. By TONY ELLIS

Mmm, khaki. Superbly, you'll be able to add your own clan logo to your uniform in online play.

Think *Battlefield 1942*, but with modern weapons. Which makes *Joint Operations* something rather new for Novalogic, the people who brought you *Blackhawk Down*, *Delta Force* and its various sequels, and indeed many of the PC's best games of modern day; khaki-clad goings-on with guns. Yes, it's still khaki, and yes, it still has guns, but while the *Delta Force* titles were primarily single-player games that just happened to have a great multiplayer bolted-on, *Joint Ops* is designed to be multi-player from the very start.

Think modern weapons... and jungle. *Joint Ops* is set in sub-tropical Indonesia, a world away from the somewhat sparse environments of *BF*'s WWII. Why pick on the poor old Indonesians, we ask producer Joel Taubel, having been invited by Novalogic to an exclusive preview and play of their latest code. It transpires that the Indonesian's current government has disintegrated, and rival military separatist factions are now fighting for control of the country. So that's all right then: clearly we're doing freedom and democracy a favour by stepping in to sort out the mess. 'We' being a multinational Western military force, hence 'Joint' operations.

Note the sun glare. The upgraded *BHD* engine is full of shader-based tricks like this.

This up-to-the-minute setting means you get to play with up-to-the-minute military hardware. AK47s, M60 machineguns, M4s and stinger missiles to name but a few of the juicy weapons on offer. Plus: vehicles. Lots of vehicles. Chinooks, Blackhawks, and Pumas in the air, humvees, ATVs and trucks on land, and more besides. Even better: boats. Most *Joint Ops* maps feature as much water as they do dry land, and there's a lively mix of craft for getting about on it: Zodiacs, patrol boats, and the massive LCAC, a hovercraft that can itself ferry smaller vehicles like the humvees. When you realise that most of these boats also come with miniguns and grenade launchers, you begin to understand just how much of a new dimension this last feature is going to bring to multiplayer combat.

"Only massive games like *PlanetSide* offer you this sort of scale."

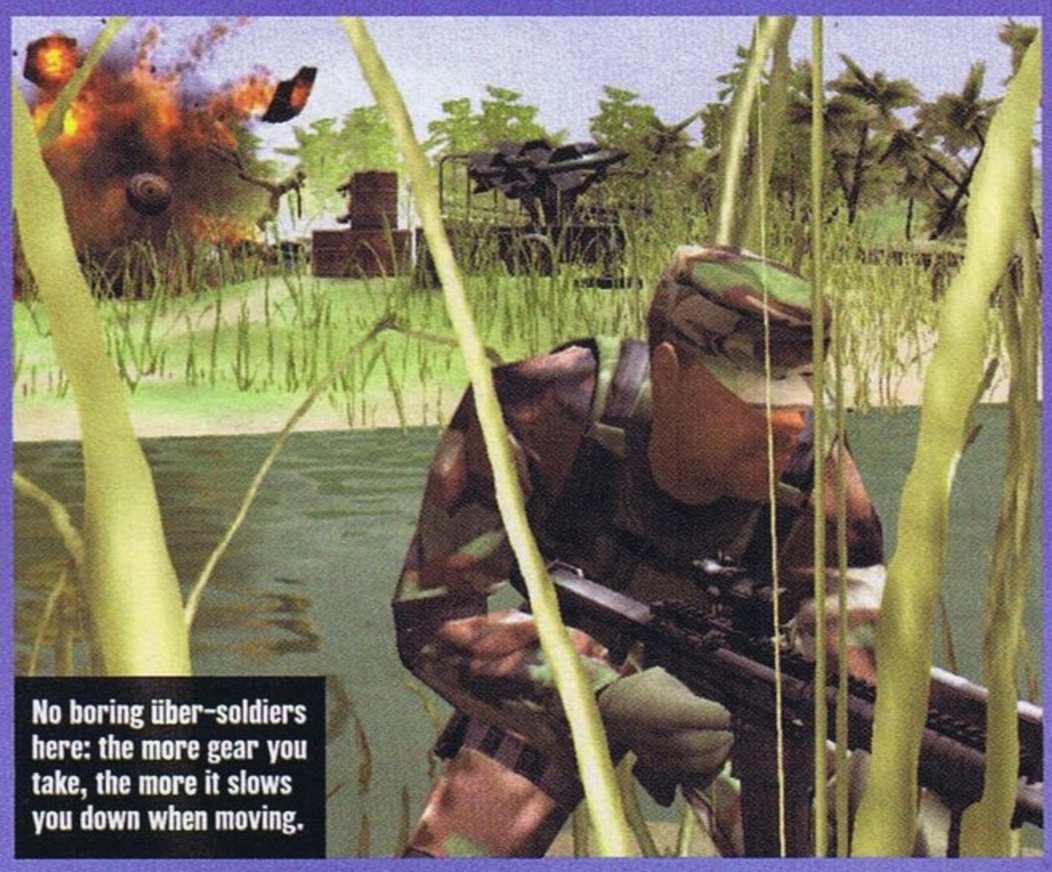
Joint Operations is *big*. At one point, when Joel Taubel wants to demonstrate some finer point of the day-and-nighttime lighting to us, he used the server controls to zoom out from our FPS perspective. And out... And out... The slope we were standing on has shrunk to a mere feature on a sprawling beach. And out... The sprawling beach has shrunk to a mere feature on a much larger island. And out... Joel is used to this, of course. Only when he hears the gasps of journalistic amazement does he realise that he has inadvertently flabbergasted us. "This is actually one of the smaller maps," he says.

The smallest *JO* maps are two square kilometres, probably around two thirds or more the size of a *Battlefield* map. The biggest *JO* maps are *64 square kilometres* in size. A frankly mind-boggling immensity, so big it is almost impossible to get your head around it. Only massively multiplayer online games like *PlanetSide* offer you that sort of scale – which raises an intriguing possibility. With up to 64 players allowed at once – and Novalogic are hinting that this figure may even go higher at release time – the implication is continued over

that as well as quick lunchtime skirmishes, *JO* will field massive, log-off, have your dinner, log-back-on-again-and-it's-still-going battles for those who want them. Again, like *PlanetSide*, only, as Novalogic point out, without the monthly fee.

Around 80 multiplayer maps, of varying sizes, will ship with the game, plus a nine-map single-player campaign and 12-15 co-op maps. Within the limitations of the Indonesian setting, Level Creative Director David Durrand, who was brought to the team because of his experience in film production and designing Disney themeparks, of all things, has created as many environment types as possible. "We've got mountain jungle, mountain arid, plains... beachfront, atolls, dry grasslands, lush jungle... What we call in the trade 'golf course jungle' (palm trees but more open), marsh ferns..."

There'll be a similar variety of scenarios, Durrand says. "Some will be stealth-based, with silenced weapons, and you're going to want to go in slow, some you're going to want to go in in full attack mode, some are extremely team orientated." And some, he adds, will be influenced by *Joint Ops*' new time of day feature. The time of day is now dynamic, so that players who start a game raiding their opponents' bases at night will have to adopt a whole new strategy as the sun comes up and makes them easier to spot.



No boring über-soldiers here: the more gear you take, the more it slows you down when moving.

There'll be the usual multiplayer modes such as capture the flag, domination, king of the hill and team deathmatch... Plus an all-new mode Novalogic are keeping their lips resolutely sealed about – despite our best use of bribes, threats and mind-altering drugs – until nearer release.

Complementing the game's scale and variety of terrain are the vehicles available for racing around it. In *Joint Ops* you can expect to make a beach landing in an LCAC with up to 30 other player characters, or to drive your tank-like BTR-80 straight off a huge eight-bladed Russian Mi-26 Halo, the most powerful 'copter in the world, with your team-mates at the gunports and more of them in Blackhawks overhead, providing vital air support.

And don't expect the Indonesian rebels to be armed with pointed sticks and riding bicycles, either. Not only do they buy their equipment off-the-peg from Britain, Germany and Russia, but the Novalogic team have made game balance not merely a priority but something bordering on a personal religion. Every vehicle has its strengths and weaknesses. The Joint forces' humvees are armoured, but the Indonesian's Fast Attack Vehicles are, as the name cryptically suggests, fast. (They also look cooler: something like a beach buggy with a machinegun wielded on.) The Joint forces' Mark 5 boat is fast and has sidemounted grenade launchers and two 50 cal. guns, but the Indonesian patrol boat has a 50 cal. that is forward mounted – that means you can come up from behind to attack someone. The Mark 5 has to fire side-on.

Similarly, no one vehicle can unbalance a map, Novalogic say. The mighty Blackhawk, for example, doesn't have a front gunner. So they're vulnerable at the front and rear to a lone player on

Mod 'n' War

DIY wars: all the rage.

***Joint Ops* will ship with the map editor the team use, allowing you to place what you want where you want. After launch it's planned that the terrain and object editors will be released too, allowing you to create your own maps and vehicles from scratch and do just about what you like with the game engine.**

"Night raiders will have to adopt new strategies when the sun rises."

the ground armed with a stinger missile. Which perhaps explains why the things seem to fall out of the sky with such depressing regularity in real life US military operations. Even if you're a sniper you can take out a helicopter – scoring extra points for a headshot and the number of passengers in the craft when it goes down.

If balance is one watchword for Novalogic, control is another. An enormous amount of what happens in a game can be tailored to individual tastes by fiddling with the server settings. Says Joel: "Basically my approach was set up the guidelines: give them the canvas, give them the paints, and say 'you make it'. If someone says 'I like this game but I want to respawn faster,' they can set up their own servers where they set all the respawn times. If they want they can play with snipers, or they can filter snipers out completely. Basically, if there's anything that's going to be a feature in this game we're making it a server setting, so that if you don't want it you don't have to play with it."

Control extends not only to such things as what vehicles are available on a map, but to environmental features. In-game, Joel drags a slider controlling the time of day, and it's as if we're watching a time-lapse film: the sun races across the sky, the shadows of trees shorten, sweep across the ground and extend again. When night falls, birdsong is replaced by crickets and croaking frogs. Another slider causes the ocean to rise and fall; that offscreen crash, we're told, is a boat suddenly finding it doesn't have an ocean under it anymore. It all has an impact on strategy: flooding a familiar map can immediately render it unfamiliar, while whether or not you have the sun behind you in a fight has proved a major factor in playtesting. Likewise the 'watermurk' setting: "In a island level," explains Joel, "with crystal clear tropical waters, you might swim to an island, and if there's a sniper there he's going to see you. But if you're swimming in a jungle level and the water's murky, you can get real close..."

We had a lot of fun playtesting *Joint Ops* for the team, piling on and off Littlebirds and blowing armoured boats out of the water, and can safely say that this is a game with a lot going for it. We're not entirely convinced that the Indonesian setting and military-vs-rebels premise has the necessary breadth of appeal, however meticulously realised, but as always, we'll be happy to be proved to wrong. Certainly, *Joint Operations* is the most exciting thing to happen in the field of modern combat multiplayer to date. We'll bring you more on this title soon.

The Special Ops class is able to sneak around silently. Shh!

"Don't expect the rebels to be armed with pointed sticks."

■ ***Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising*** **will hopefully go into action in March.**

AI bugs from ***Blackhawk Down*** have been fixed, and bots can fly a chopper or ride shotgun.

Tom Clancy's SPLINTER CELL PANDORA TOMORROW

Has the Fisher-man still got a hook? You'd better believe it.

By CRAIG PEARSON

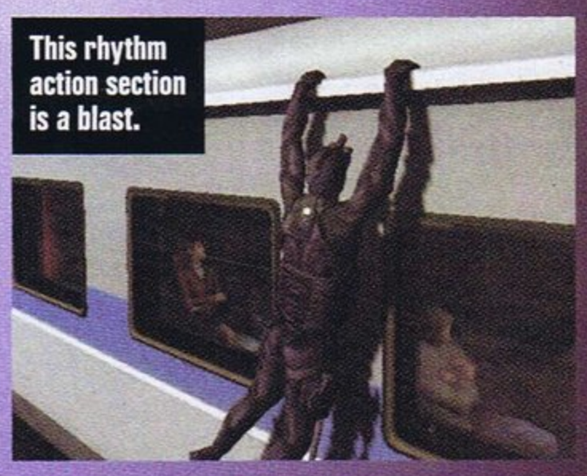
Two moments in the original *Splinter Cell* stand out in my memory. Both are bad. The first is the premise of the CIA infiltration level: you're in there on your own, tooled up with some powerful weaponry and you can't bloody use it. These CIA guys, your own people, are allowed to rain bullets into your body, but retaliation is met with dismissal. The second moment is later, in the Chinese Embassy level, and a more personal affront. I'd just activated a Save point when the third alarm level was triggered. Somewhere back there I'd obviously left a body with a toe poking out of a shadowed corner. Result? Mission abandoned, leaving that Save in a perpetual loop of failure.

I still love it, though.

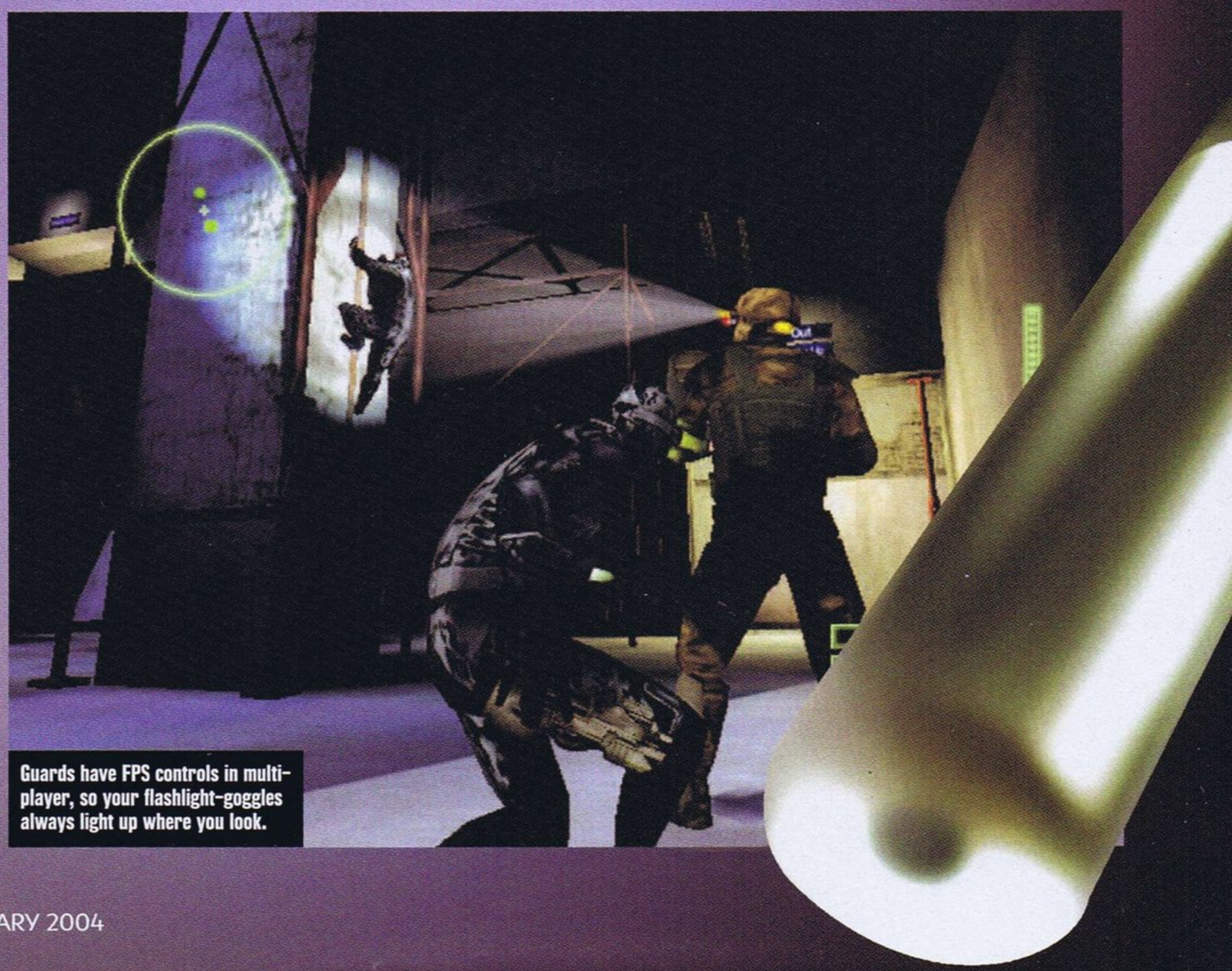
Splinter Cell was just shy of greatness; a few extra scribbled notes on a pad away from being the best game of its kind. Its frustrating genius kept me playing, not just because of the compelling plot or those wonderful toys, but because it was so damn tense. Like *Thief*, it had something different about it: the shadows, the oblivious bad guys passing just inches away, the danger behind every doorway, the unashamedly voyeuristic feel. But it was hamstrung: silly little flaws poked holes in the darkness. Flaws so obvious that it was difficult to come to terms with. Which is why my long trip to see the development team in Paris was so rewarding. I saw at first hand the strides they're making. I heard them talk about the flaws of the previous game and their determination not to make the same mistakes again. Heartening to say the least. So, *Pandora Tomorrow*, then...

It's being built from the ground up, discarding all that was wrong with the original to make a more rounded experience. With *Pandora Tomorrow*, the forum posts, the letters pages, the fan sites and the reviewers' comments have all been heeded. This game, say the developers, is a big 'thank you' to all those that made the first one the success that it was. Sure, it continued over

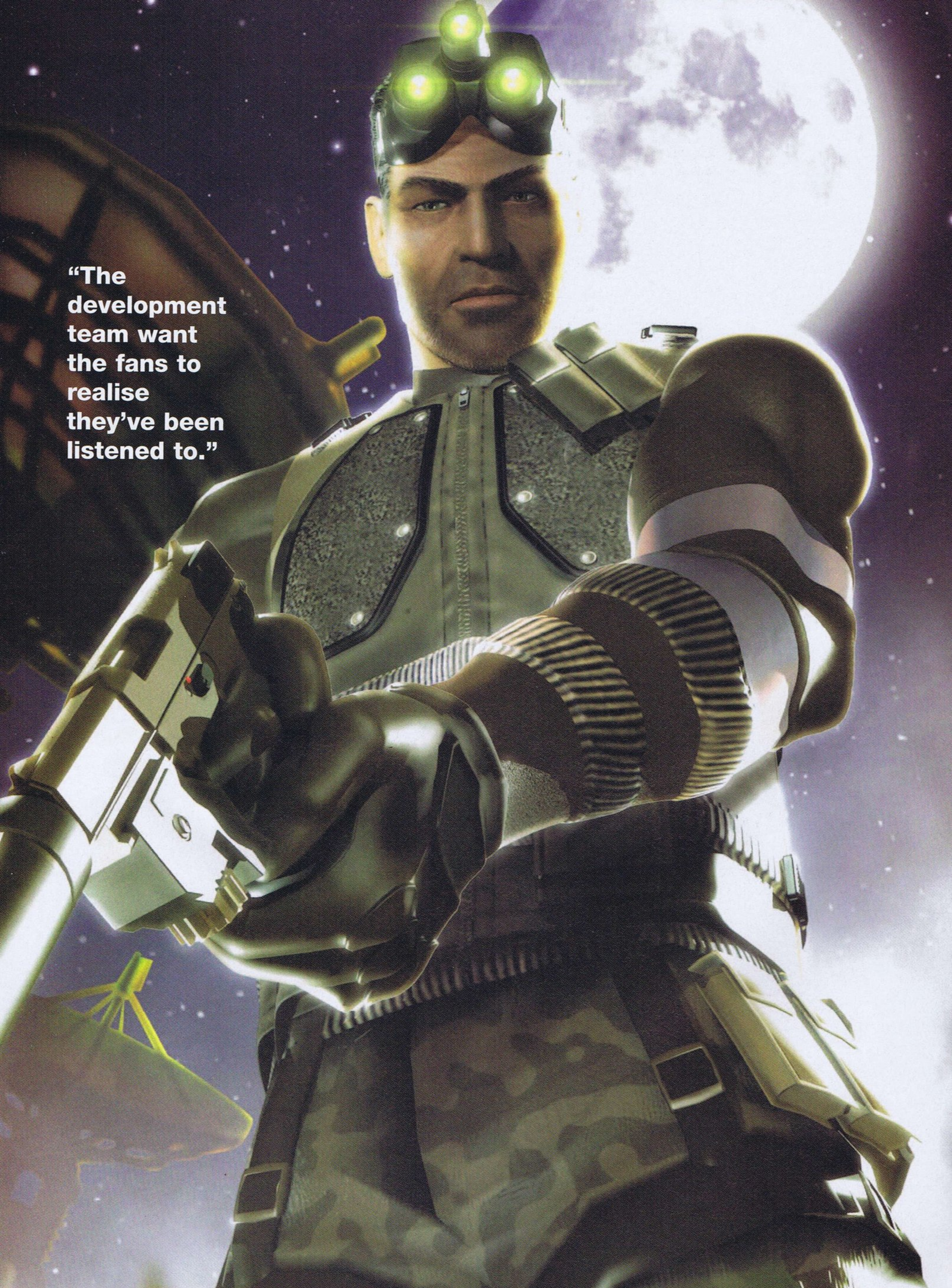
"This could be the definitive multiplayer game of the year."



This rhythm action section is a blast.



Guards have FPS controls in multi-player, so your flashlight-goggles always light up where you look.

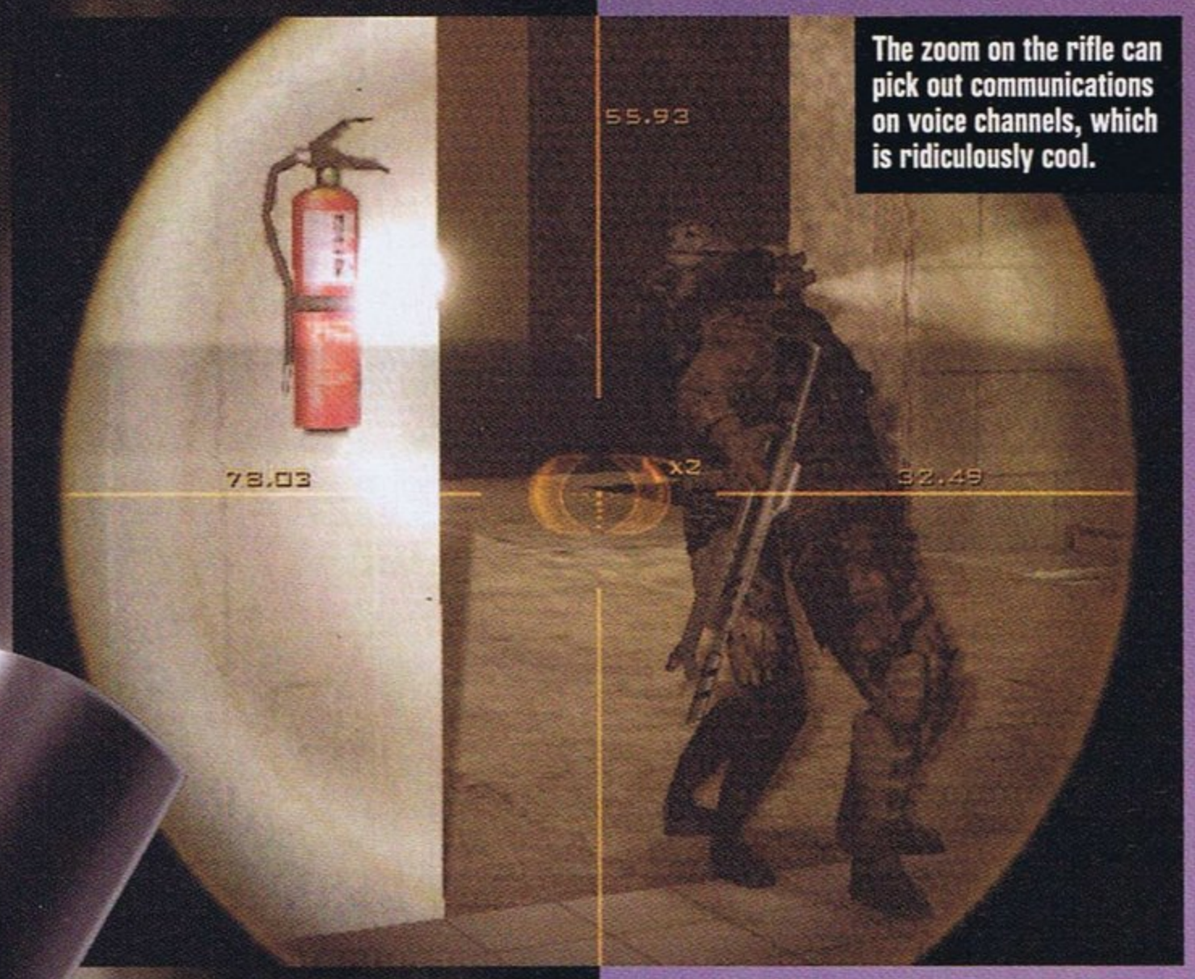

“The development team want the fans to realise they’ve been listened to.”

Combine Harvester

Innovations catalogue

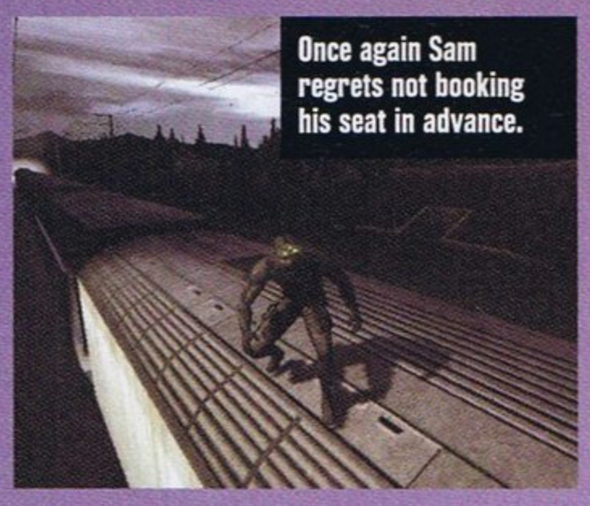
The original sticky camera was a great gadget, but when you think about it, why would a high-tech government agency give you just a camera with some blobs of Blu-Tac, when they could make something like the distraction camera? Well, now you'll get both in one, the old sticky camera gadget decommissioned like an Iraqi missile. The Optic Cable is another much improved device. Now it can be used in trapdoors when Sam moves vertically between levels, and it also has alternate vision modes to detect heat signatures.

"The enemy can spot your laser dot and follow the beam back to its source."

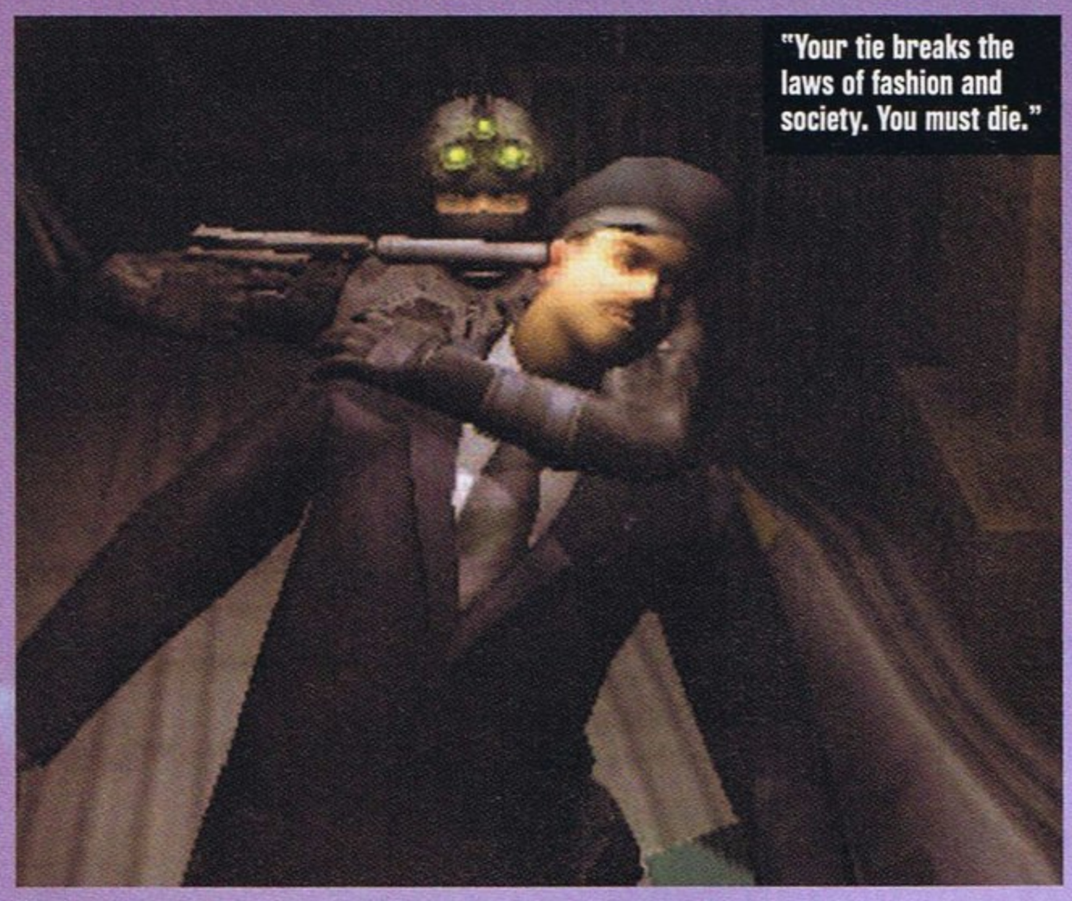


The zoom on the rifle can pick out communications on voice channels, which is ridiculously cool.

High-tech bicycle repair men prefer working in the dark.



Once again Sam regrets not booking his seat in advance.



"Your tie breaks the laws of fashion and society. You must die."

plays very much like the first, but it's been filtered through all the criticism. The development team want the fans to realise they've been listened to. The sheer bloody-minded difficulty is gone. No more CIA-type levels, thank God.

Also gone is the three-level alarm mode that made saving such a hazard. The enemy's alert status doesn't end the game if you trip too many alarms, but they will respond to a heightened sense of threat. The first threat level will make them more aggressive in their searches. Activate a second state and they'll put on flak jackets. Activate the last state and they'll add helmets.

This system is nicely shown off in the first level. Sam just happens to be fighting an Indonesian guerrilla group this time. He nails some goons with a sniper rifle; the enemy drop like sacks and the alarm level raises. The guards start scouring the area with extra vigour. There's nothing to prevent you carrying on, except your own skill. At no point will the game simply stop. It's doubly interesting to see the 'terrorists' not being portrayed as out-and-out godless villains, particularly in the times we live in. The methods of Suhadi Sadono, leader of the cell, are abhorrent, but he's portrayed as fighting for his people and a way of life.

Gun accuracy had also been a major gripe of the fans. The handgun was always far too inaccurate. The developer's argument is that it was deliberately underpowered, to force players to use stealthier methods, but they've listened all the same and added a laser sight. The downside is that the enemy can spot the dot and follow the beam back to its source. If you want to use it, you'll have to be sneaky about it.

Another complaint was that the original was a little too formulaic. The linearity, despite being wonderfully elegant, was stifling. Being told exactly where to go all the time shattered the illusion of the lone operative living on his wits. So the developers are rustling up a number of levels which feature alternate paths. One of these levels deliberately sticks the middle finger right up to the critics. It's set on a terrorist-packed passenger train humming its way through France; you can't get more linear than that, on the face of it.

But this level beautifully demonstrates a number of *Pandora*'s innovations and improvements. You can choose to go over, under, through, or along the side of each carriage. Each route throws up its own challenges and stretches the game's lifespan better than the blood of virgins. The most impressive bit is watching Sam Fisher move along the side of the train. His precarious monkey swinging is almost a rhythm action game in itself combined with wondrous lighting effects. Sam clings to the side of the train, moving past the windows. If he's in front of a window when a light passes, he'll be spotted by anyone looking out. Meanwhile, the traditional routes – inside, over the top or under the train – give a few more insights into some of the game's other improvements.

Story Glory

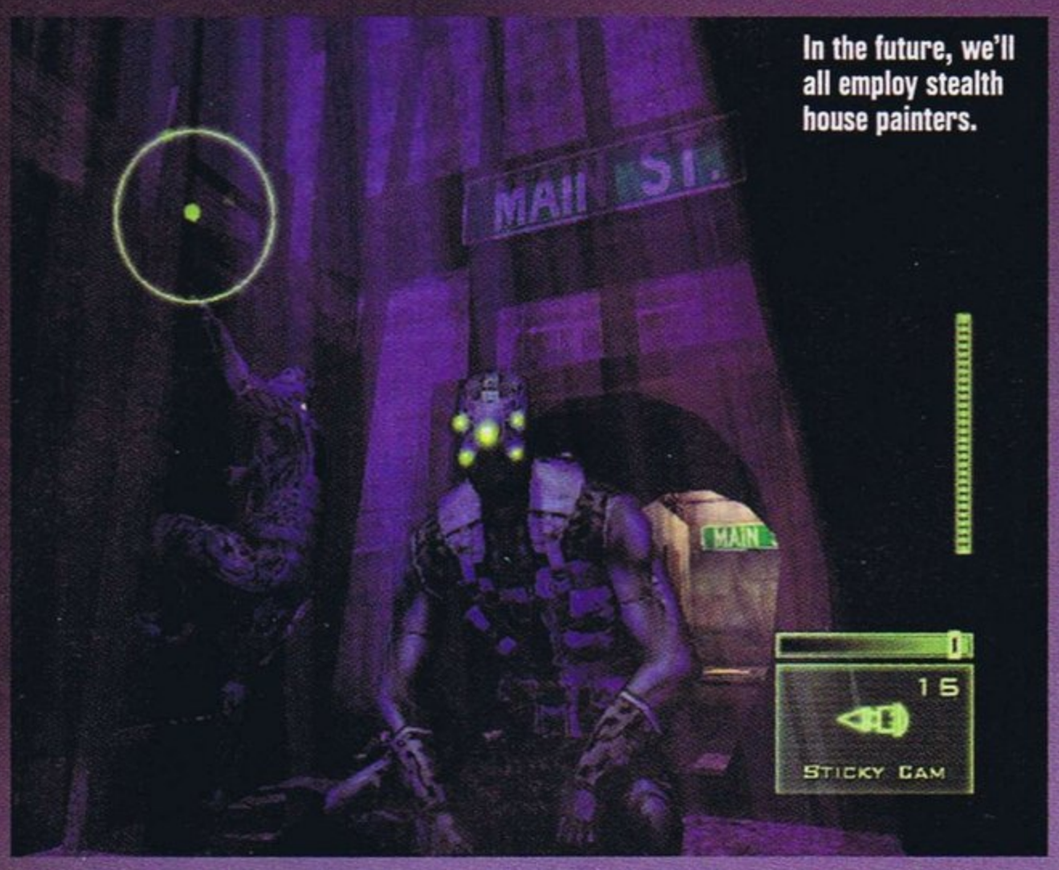
Building a better tomorrow

Although Clancy's name is splashed all over the shop, *Pandora*'s writing duties go to Hollywood scribe and director JT Petty. It's his duty to suspend our disbelief, and to keep the technology well within realistic boundaries. The man behind *Mimic: Sentinel* and *Soft For Digging* gave us his take on maintaining the Clancyesque feel of the game: "My intention with all of the characters, style, and plot was to further develop a coherent universe. Rather than a sequel for its own sake, I wanted a natural progression of the world. Essentially: 'What's the next worst thing that could happen?' Everything's fact-checked and realistic. Everything should feel like part of a fully functioning, interconnected world. Nothing should seem like it would be completely out of place on CNN."

The split-jump, for example. The fuss made over its inclusion in the original game proved misplaced. Tragically, the levels weren't designed for it. In fact, you could only use it tactically three times in the whole game. Naturally the sequel puts that to rights. On the train, for example, you can use split-jump to brace yourself between carriages, the passengers and terrorists passing underneath without a clue.

But *Pandora* is not all about light tweaking. Currently, the development team are only ready to reveal one major addition, but it's the one I've been begging for ever since the invention of the stealth genre: multiplayer.

This is no tacked-on extra, but a complex piece of storytelling that slots into the storyline of *Pandora Tomorrow*. In the same way *Enter the Matrix* played off *The Matrix: Reloaded*, the multiplayer sections are components of the storyline that you hear about in the single-player game. They're integral to appreciating the whole scope of the game. It's not the Spy vs Spy deathmatch that everyone hoped for, but it is a logical, story-based step that could make *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow* the definitive multi-player game of the year. continued over



In the future, we'll all employ stealth house painters.

Careful: the AI is smart enough to track a laser sight back to its user.

The format is Spy vs Guards, two player classes who form the best loved bickering twosome since Tom & Jerry. Up to four players face-off per side but this is not *Splinter Cell* as we know it. Surprisingly, the view shifts to first-person when you play as a guard. The reasoning? These guys are hunters, and need razor-sharp reactions to succeed in the job. In other words, the guards benefit from the traditional twitch gaming angle while the Spy sticks to stealth tactics because third-person offers neither speed, nor accuracy, but does enable Agents to make the best use of cover. It doesn't stop there. Vision modes are different too. Instead of night or thermal sights, the guards have a motion tracking capability and an electrical signal sensor, as well as a low-tech flashlight. You'll need this equipment to fight the black-on-black spies, but it's all about picking the right gadget at the right time. A spy will effectively become invisible if he decides to stop dead in the dark and turn off his vision modes. Unless a guard thinks to counter with a stab of his flashlight. If the spy makes a break for it, and a guard has tracking vision on, then the scuttling infiltrator will be picked out in a grey box over a red background. You can also pick up the electrical interference spies cast like dandruff when they use vision modes.

Shockingly, Sam is sacked for multiplayer. Instead, sneaky gamers play as Shadownet spies. They rely on acrobatic movement even more than Fisher. They're a covert operations unit, sent in to take deal with situations too hairy for our hero. They have different moves and a greater emphasis on agility. Their forward roll will cover more area, and they can recover faster from a tumble. The pipe grip has been expanded, so spies can switch from a horizontal pipe to a vertical one, turning levels into a giant climbing frame. Every gadget choice is but a button away, but the game won't pause. Clearly, the Shadownet spies have been developed to make the multiplayer game viable but they do prove that stealth doesn't necessarily mean slow.

Move along

Twist and shout

We've only been shown two of Sam's additional moves, so far. One is a SWAT turn (based on techniques taught in SWAT team training) that makes you invisible if you move past a doorway. Apparently, it's a real technique. The second move is inspired by Clancy's world of secret agent fantasy. Sam can now jump further from his split-jump. Stuck split-legged between two walls, Sam can lean into one leg and give himself an angle to leap higher still. Yes.

The upshot is that *Splinter Cell* multiplayer plays out like a high-tech game of cat and mouse. The sneaking, slippery spies are dark forms that slide past backlit doorways; the panicky guards have to fight the very shadows that loom in every corner. The outgunned spies must pick their moments with deadly precision; sitting, coiled in a corner. Watching. The levels are built for multiple assaults. Every building can be accessed from doors, open windows and sewers, but everything is wired, alerting the guards to intruders. Watching the developers spring their way through the levels, crystalises how well this approach could work. Headset voice comms add to the atmos. Take an enemy hostage and you can trash-talk his ear off. But it gets better. Exchanging tactics with your teammates over the wire adds a whole new dimension to the assault, but brilliantly, the enemy can intercept your communications and listen in. There are more impressive details yet: hazy flashbang after-shocks cloud the view and ring the ears; injuries stream incriminating bloodtrails and you can use the walls to backflip over the head of any pursuer.

Just when it's getting too much the development team call it a day. Much remains hidden. Check the corners.

■ **We'll spy *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow* on shelves in March.**

The multiplayer levels are built with several insertion points to enable a greater level of freedom.

REVIEWS

In which we put every new release to our panel of PC gaming experts.

God In Your Machine

But the *Invisible War* remains hard to find

Those of you who, like us, are accustomed to Kieron's rambling essays on game theory will take to his *Deus Ex: Invisible War* review like cyber-ducks to heavy water. For everyone else: it's a shooter, with role-playing bits, set in the future, and it's really good. I wouldn't suggest that his Post-Marxist deconstruction of the game's finer points is anything less than essential reading, but I know some of you appreciate a black and white answer: Buy it.

It's been available in the US since December, but if you've chosen, like a good Christian spurning the slippery pleasures of the flesh until wedlock, to wait for the Australian release, there are surprise sources of pleasurable relief on offer this month. I speak of *Beyond Good & Evil*, a wonderfully streamlined action-adventure. I speak also of *Magic The Gathering: Battlegrounds*, *NBA Live 2004* and *Lock On*, all of which are most agreeable gaming alternatives.

But there's one big story this month. Flip the page and prepare, as Keiron might well say, your thinking-brains.

ROSS ATHERTON
REVIEWS EDITOR

THE PC GAMES ADDICT MACHINES

There's no point reviewing new games on old PCs, otherwise we wouldn't be doing them justice. After all, how can you tell how well a game runs until you've seen it on the best machine available?

That's why we've turned to Emagen. Not just because they're able to keep working with an up to date PC to put the games through their paces, but also due to the fact that we're certain that they do the best system assembly in the business. Look at the picture below and you won't find a stray ATA cable or screw out of place. If you're serious about assembling the best machine you can, you'd do well to contact Emagen.

THE PC GAMES ADDICT REVIEW MACHINE:
- AMD Athlon XP 3000+
- Asus A7N8X Deluxe
- Corsair TWINX 512MB PC3200
- 128MB Radeon 9700 Pro
- 19" Mitsubishi Flat CRT Monitor
- Western Digital WD800JB HDD
- 16X DVD, 52x24x52 CDRW
- Antec LanBoy Chassis
- Mitsubishi 104Key Black Keyboard
- Microsoft Intellimouse Explorer

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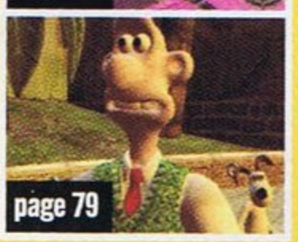

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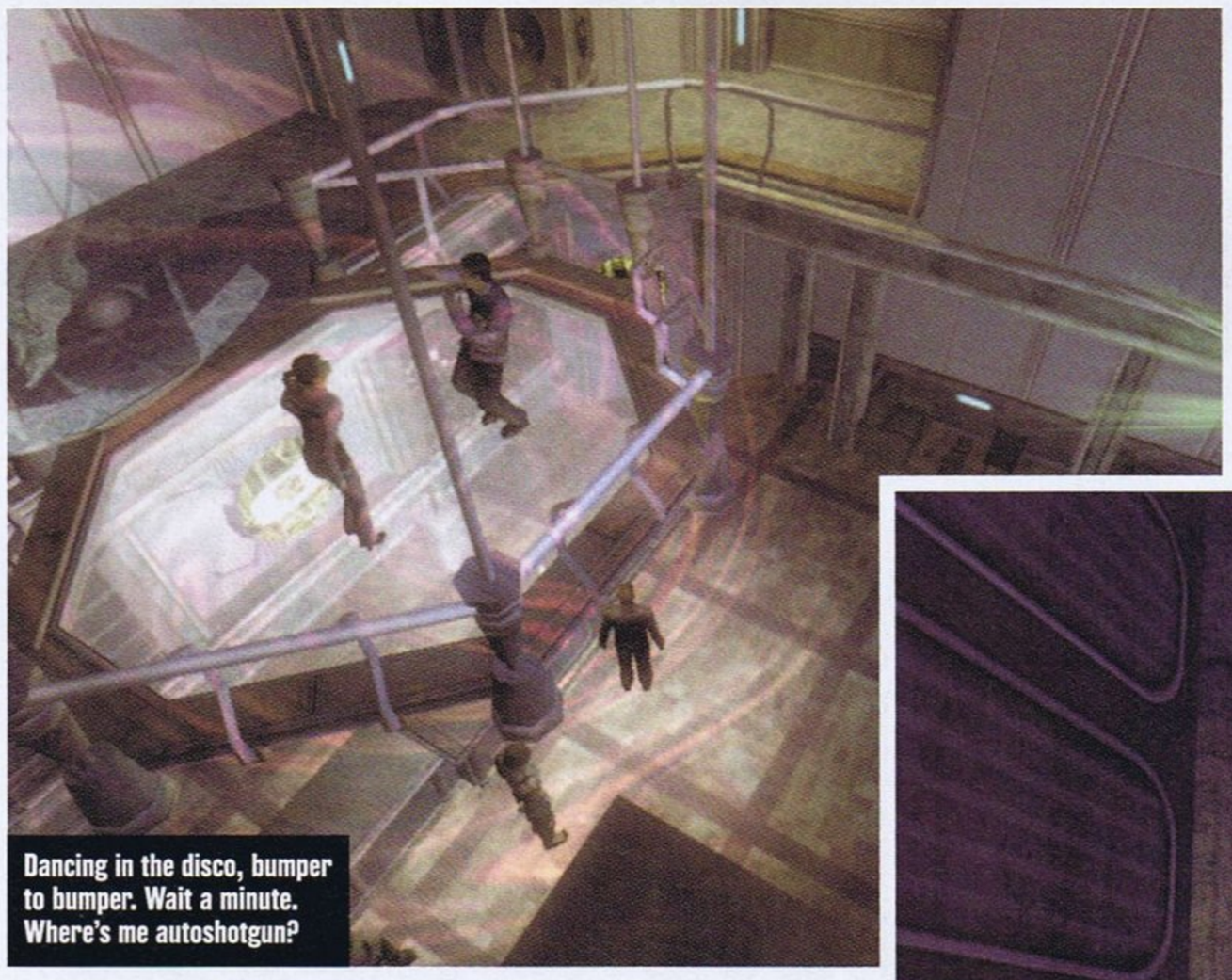
RIGHT TO REPLY

Think we've treated a game unfairly? Or perhaps we've gone too easy on a game. Address your redress to pcga@derwenthoward.com.au or write to us via snail mail by sending your correspondence to Feedback, PC Games Addict, Derwent Howard, PO Box 1037, Bondi Junction, NSW 1355

GENRE: ROLE-PLAYING

DEUS EX INVISIBLE WAR

Does the PC's premier sequel really have a dark future, or do we just need to turn the gamma up a bit?



Dancing in the disco, bumper to bumper. Wait a minute. Where's me autoshotgun?

Pest extermination in the future. The mousetrap is obsolete.

The Mako Mag-rail is a high tech energy gun. It's alt-fire is perfect for bot-blasting.

BAD WORKMEN...

...Have slightly fewer tools than before to blame. While *Deus Ex* divided the breaking and entry equipment into both lockpicks and multitools, now the latter are used on all locks. Clearly, since the pair worked in identical ways, on mechanical and electronic locks respectively, it makes no difference in the game at all.

LOOK me in the eyes and tell me what you want. No, not that. That's the first thought off the top of your head, a cheap and easy lie to dodge the question. It's not the real truth. Here's a hint for your mental rambling: why did you pick up this PC games magazine? Why are you reading this review? What do you *want*?

Now hold that thought. We're going to be relatively restrained for the majority of this review, but we'll come back to that little point later. It's an important point to remember, as it's all that really matters here.

For those who don't frequent online games forums compulsively, the *Invisible War* demo was released online in late November last year. The reaction to it, in certain circles, has been somewhat akin to Hitler turning up to an Anti-Nazi League rally. People are angry. There have been rumours of mobs forming in middle America brandishing "WARREN SPECTOR=ANTICHRIST" signs and burning effigies of lead designer Harvey Smith. They say *Invisible War* is a betrayal of *Deus Ex*.

Strong words.

Now, to prosaically bring newcomers up to speed and help the more amnesiac members of the audience, this is the sequel to one of the most critically acclaimed games of recent times. *Deus Ex* reviewed spectacularly everywhere. A near-future tale of conspiracy, it fitted the post *X-Files* millennial mood like a leather-studded glove. What it was really hailed for, however, was its open-ended free-form approach to the first-person action-adventure game. While the general arc of the plot was predetermined, the details were defined by your own abilities and nature. You want to be the ultra-violent cybernetic monster who makes the Terminator leak oil in his bed? Load up with weapons, select the right implants and stomp off to battle. Alternatively, you want to be the pacifist ghost, dancing between the shadows? Take this cloaking device, this stun-rod and this obscure pathway between those crates. And so it went, on and on: distance sniping, hacking, evasion, predation, whatever. *Deus Ex* was all things to all men. It was Whitney Houston's "I'm Every Woman", without the embarrassing submissive tendencies. Or the disco.

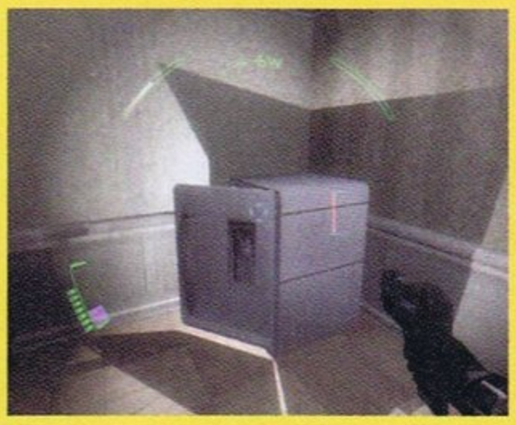
However, it wasn't perfect. In fact, it was far from perfect. It was often a little bit rubbish. This is important to remember when playing *Invisible War*. If you find yourself – for example – saying "the AI in *Deus Ex* didn't do that!", you've got rose-tinted sunglasses on. The AI in *Deus Ex* didn't notice continued over

NOON

SECRET LEMONADE DRINKER

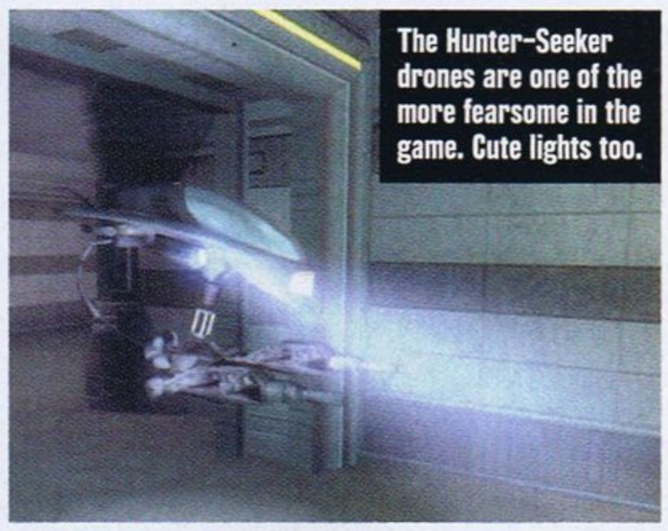
Here's a closer look at how *Invisible War*'s groundbreaking lighting system works. With a fridge. Oh come on, you're not *really* impressed by those demos where a hanging lightbulb goes swinging this way and that, are you? That's so last year.

Trusty cold-box. You chill my beverage. Inside, you are full of light. None escapes through your doughty seals.

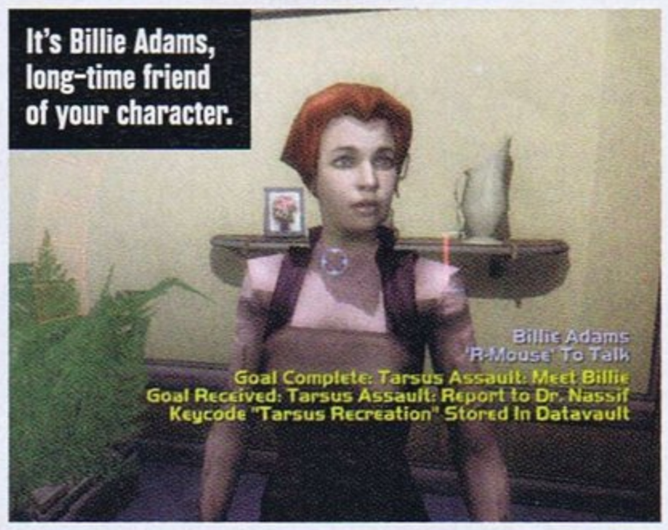


But hark! What light on yonder kitchen breaks? It is the fridge, and a cheap 60W lightbulb is the source.

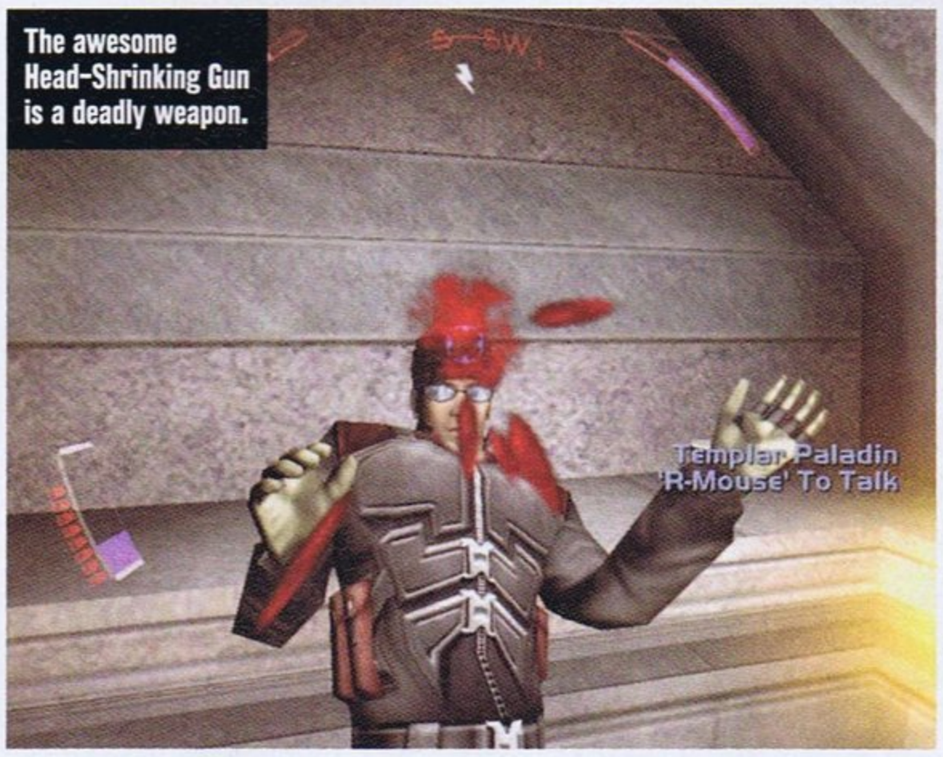
Fully open, light is triumphant. All is visible. Now, quickly, close the door before the milk goes off.



The Hunter-Seeker drones are one of the more fearsome in the game. Cute lights too.


Billie Adams
'R-Mouse' To Talk
Goal Complete: Tarsus Assault: Meet Billie
Goal Received: Tarsus Assault: Report to Dr. Nassif
Keycode "Tarsus Recreation" Stored In Datavault

It's Billie Adams, long-time friend of your character.



The awesome Head-Shrinking Gun is a deadly weapon.

There's probably a pacifist solution to this. Probably.

Divine

SUXOR! HAXOR!

The interface is too big!
Set it to 0% Opacity in the options menu and everything save the energy and health bars will disappear, reappearing only when needed.

My mouse feels unresponsive!
That's because of a mouselag feature. Find the default.ini in the system files and change the value from 75 to 0 to return things to more standard PC normality.

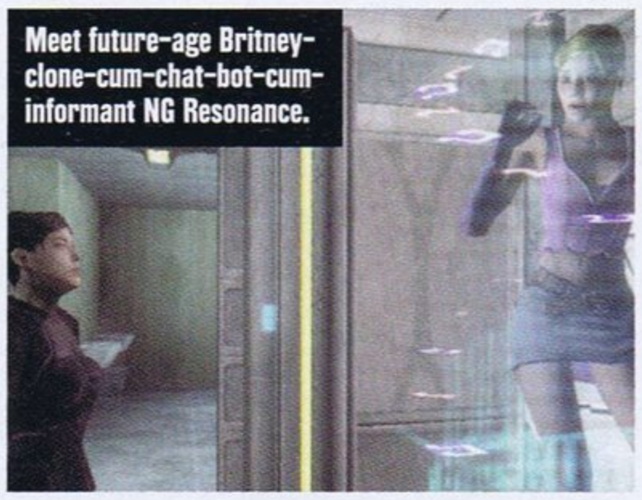
People take too many shots in the head to die!
Either play 'realistic' difficulty mode or use a more appropriate weapon for the takedown. Stealth killers should have their eyes on a silenced sniper-rifle.

The baton is useless!
Anyone serious about Melee should be finding the appropriate augs. The one in question is strength. On full, playing on normal difficulty, you'll be cutting people down like wheat.

corpses. You could bounce stuff off its head for most of the game with nary a comment. You could often shoot a guard's best mate beside him, and he wouldn't raise a low-polygon eyebrow. *Invisible War*'s AI is far from perfect but it's better in every way that counts.

In terms of core values, core plot and core play, *Invisible War* is the direct heir to *Deus Ex*. Set twenty years on from the original, after a world-wide collapse, global society is getting back on its feet. You play a nanotech-modified trainee at something called 'The Tarsus Academy'. Shortly after the opening of the game, you find yourself flying the nest and – as in the original – trying to work out what's actually going on in the world. Conspiracy and control are the two major plot threads and, yet again, this is one of the few games where NPCs have the audacity to actually *lie* to you.

What is the truth and – when you discover it – how do you feel about it?



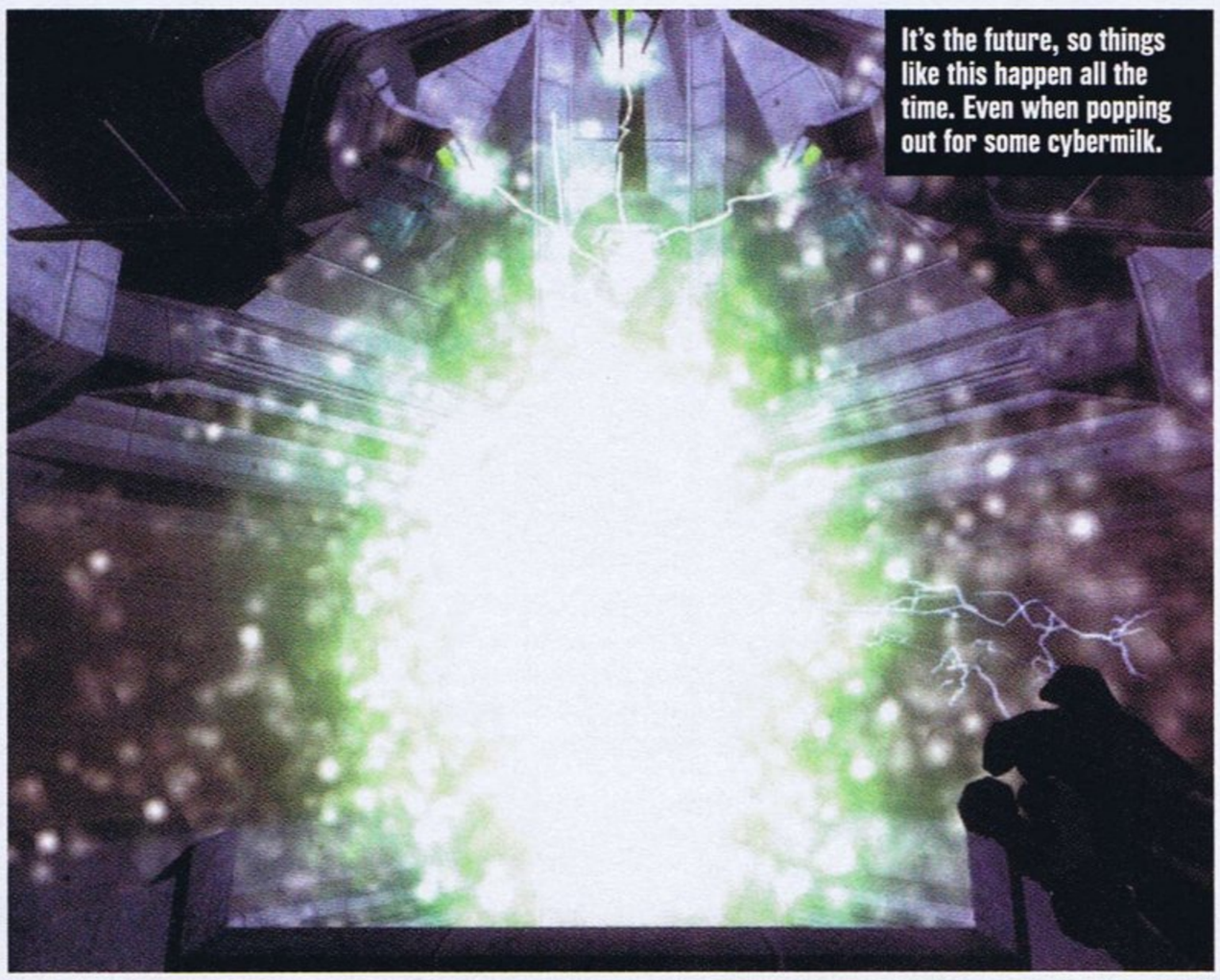
Meet future-age Britney-clone-cum-chat-bot-cum-informant NG Resonance.

That, essentially, is the plot. Your missions are given to you by characters in the game, varying from small RPG-style sub-quests (Go and do this for me for this minor award, like delivering a message or stealing a parcel) to major missions. The latter are where the meat of the game lie, often involving infiltrating a base for one purpose or another, and in the manner you choose. Like its illustrious forefather, either going in the front door screaming or crawling down deserted ventilation shafts are equally valid routes.

However, you must remember while playing *Invisible War* that it isn't *Deus Ex*. You may notice that I'm referring to the game as *Invisible War* rather than *Deus Ex 2* to try and make the psychological leap easier. Yes, it's completely based on the same principles as *Deus Ex*, but it's *not the same game*. Things are different, and anyone wasting time obsessing about what's missing won't notice what they actually have.

To choose an example of a game mechanic that's absent which I think is a distinct loss: leaning. The argument is that few players used it, and that if you stick your head around a corner, you're just as conspicuous as you would be stepping from behind it. I disagree. Leaning allows all manner of tactics, and while there are plentiful other options for gaining information about your locale – hacking cameras, spy drones, x-ray vision, bot domination – it's still missed. However, if you obsess over *that* you won't notice the boon of having a decent mantling control. While in *Deus Ex* you were in the ludicrous position – as in most first-person games – of being incapable of jumping on top of something that was clearly half your height, holding the Space bar in this game enables you to pull yourself up onto it. It's the most

Observe the battle-robots in their natural habitat. Do not feed. Or shoot. Oh, all right. Shoot.

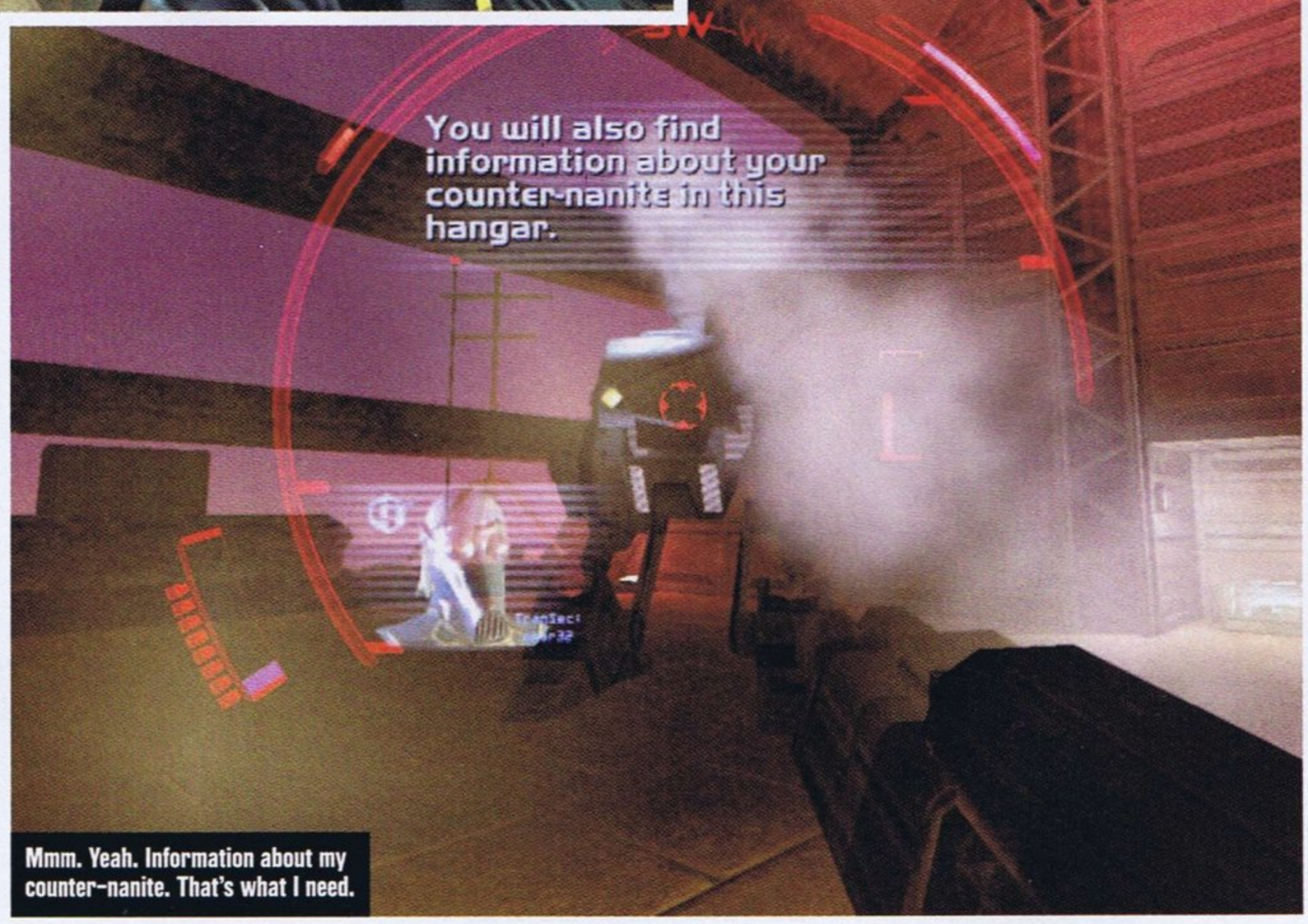

It's the future, so things like this happen all the time. Even when popping out for some cybermilk.

He has a soppy beret. Kill him.

Give me ten gold pieces and I will give you the amulet of Thron. Oh – sorry. Wrong sort of RPG.

reliable execution of this technology I've seen in an FPS, and in play I trust it enough to make a speculative leap knowing I can catch hold of something on the far side. In terms of player exploration, it makes a profound and powerful difference.

Here are some more omissions: while recent messages are saved, you're no longer capable of going through a list of everything that was said, ever. E-mails on computer systems have gone walkabout. While both books and datapads litter the levels, providing extra information, newspapers are missing. Passwords for computer systems are now stored automatically when you find them instead of requiring you to write them down. There is no reloading. The precision of your shot is no longer related to the time you held still prior to pulling the trigger. Your own damage is now taken generally rather than on specific body parts. And... er... While you now have a choice of both genders, you're now incapable of selecting an albino character. Sitting continued over



Mmm. Yeah. Information about my counter-nanite. That's what I need.

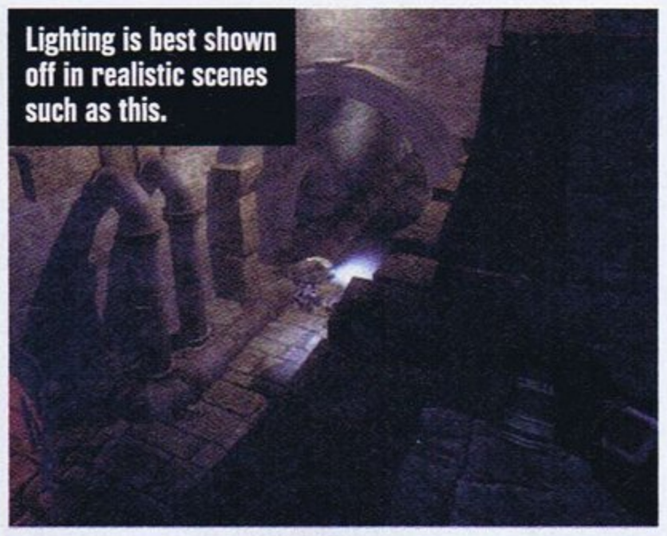
NEW WORLD ORDER

Right from the start you'll be pulled between the conflicting agendas of various power groups in the mid-to-late 21st century. Let's have a brief, spoiler-free look at them.

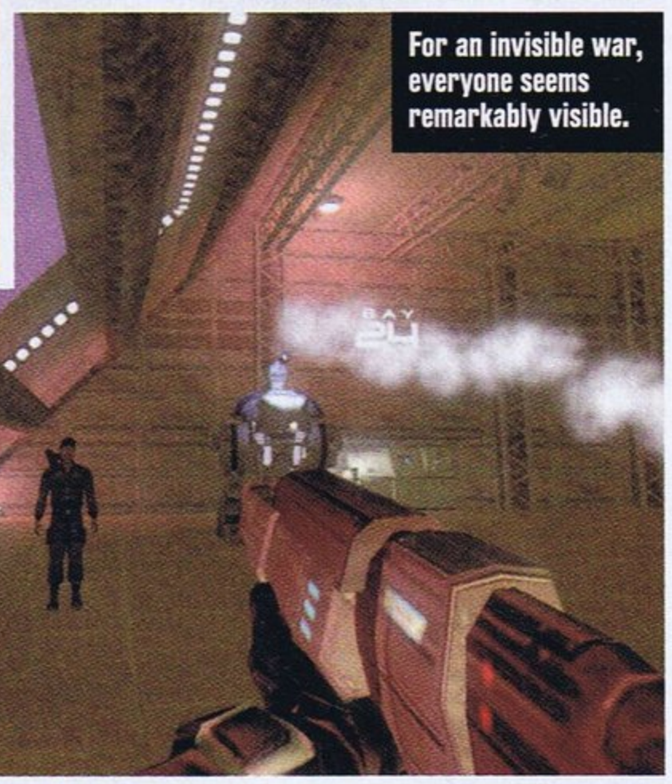
The World Trade Organisation are trying to push everyone into beautiful and profitable free relationships based on exchange of goods and money.

The Order are a church seeking to unify all the world religions. They believe, as the name suggests, in creating inner order in people's lives.

The Omar are a group of posthumanists believing in altering the human form through extreme cybernetics. They look like they're on the way to a fetish night.

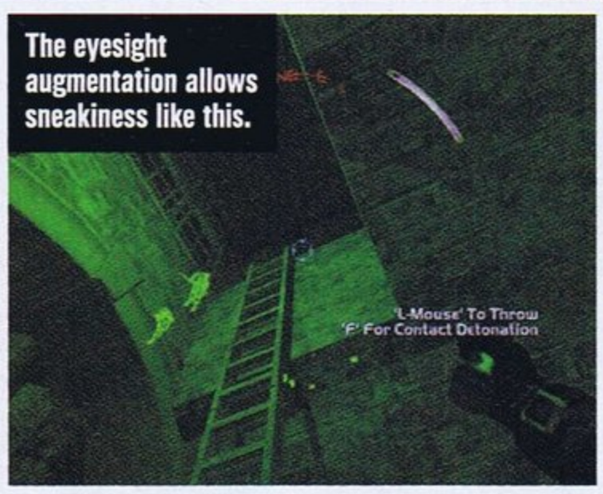


Lighting is best shown off in realistic scenes such as this.



For an invisible war, everyone seems remarkably visible.

Don't hit on the girl guards. It's undignified.



The eyesight augmentation allows sneakiness like this.

See. I wasn't joking about penguins burning.

NIGHT CLUBBING

I've had to fight incredibly hard to not reveal a minor spoiler to you. Game moment of the year, however, can be found by going to Club Vox, the nightclub in Seattle, while playing as a male character. What can I say? You gotta see it.

down to consider what elements are actually completely absent from *Invisible War*, you quickly run into a brick wall.

If there's so little completely missing, why is everyone so upset? Well, what is there is *different*. While the demo doesn't really provide convincing evidence of the changes in operation, most of the public horror is based on the simple fact that change has taken place, rather than the nature of the change. The gaming animal is often a conservative one.

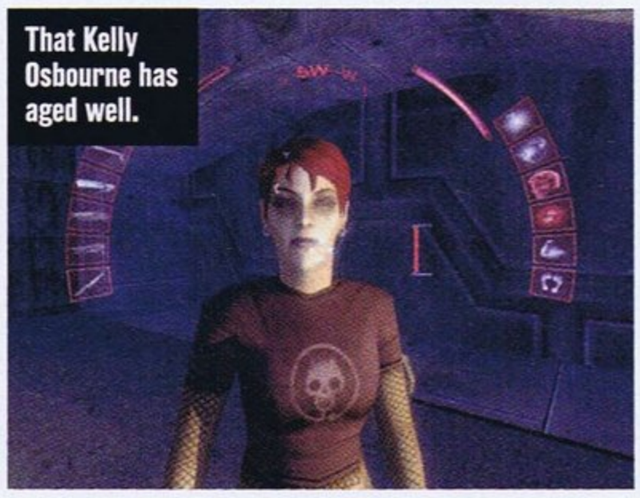
In terms of game dynamics, the biggest alteration (and the one which is presented most poorly in the demo) is the transformation of a game which previously used several techniques (skills and mechanical augmentations, mainly) to shape character uniqueness, to a game which is solely reliant on technology to do that. In other words, as in *Elite* and *System Shock*, you are what you possess. Each of your five augmentation slots have three choices of system to install. Installing a canister in slot one would allow you, for example, a choice of either regeneration, enhanced vision or (if it's a black market bio-canister) a spy drone. Once this system is in place, you're precluded from running the others (although you can overwrite it with another biomod later). Equally, for each augmentation you can increase the potency by two further levels with extra canisters. For example, upgrading the vision mod enables you to expand your ability to see through obstacles as well as human opponents, bots and surrounding inanimate objects.

"What do you want? Why do you play games?"

Equally, there's increased relevance placed on which weapons you choose to carry and how you decide to alter them with weapon mods. Rather than *Deus Ex*'s system, which was based on every weapon taking up a differing amount of space in your inventory and often required you to drop huge amounts of equipment to fit in a new object, this one is based on a simpler slot concept, with every item – or number of items in the case of grenades – taking a single space. This means that what you carry is based on what manner of character you wish to play rather than economy of space. In that way, weapons actually function more like skills in the original game – enabling you to spend your resources on shaping rather than something you're pressured into. Choosing a baton to smack the game people up is a choice equal to taking the flamethrower. Since each part of the armoury has been created to fit a specific role, the question is what sort of game *you* want to play. This is especially true when adding weapon augmentations to the mix, with each firearm capable of carrying two mods that do everything from adding a silencer or increasing damage, to adding EMP damage and...

FONT=72

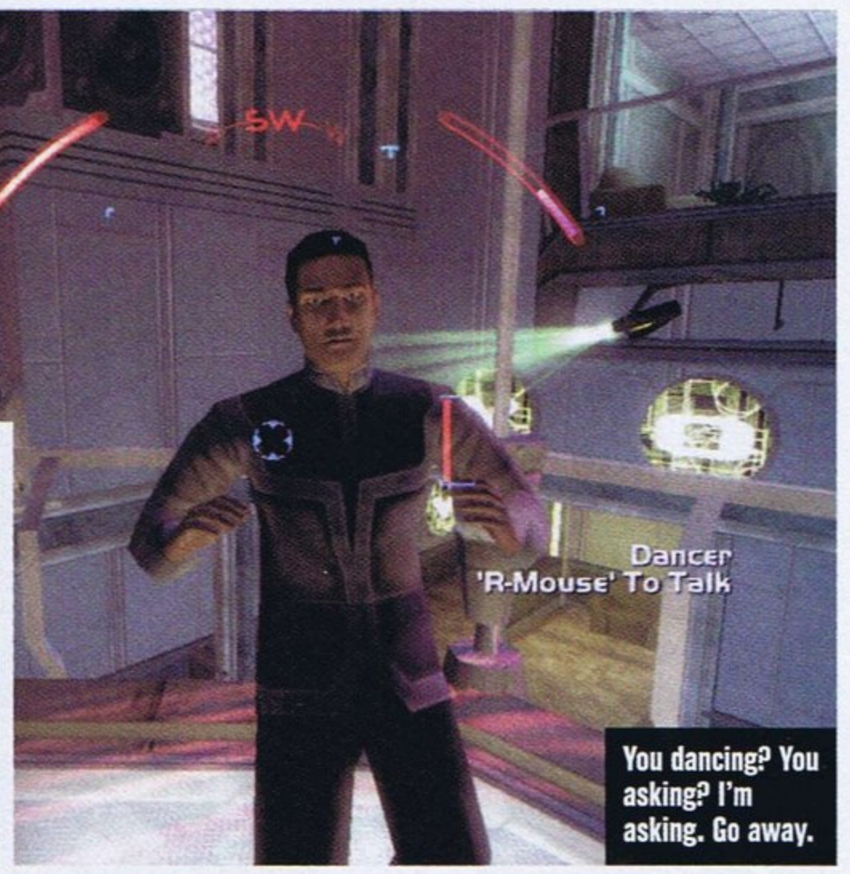
Currently, if you import *Invisible War*, the text is a little on the large side. If you're willing to delve into the .ini files, you can alter it. Hopefully, for those who are wary of such magic, they'll include the ability to alter this in the patches before the Australian release.



That Kelly Osbourne has aged well.

Future Goths favour brown over black.

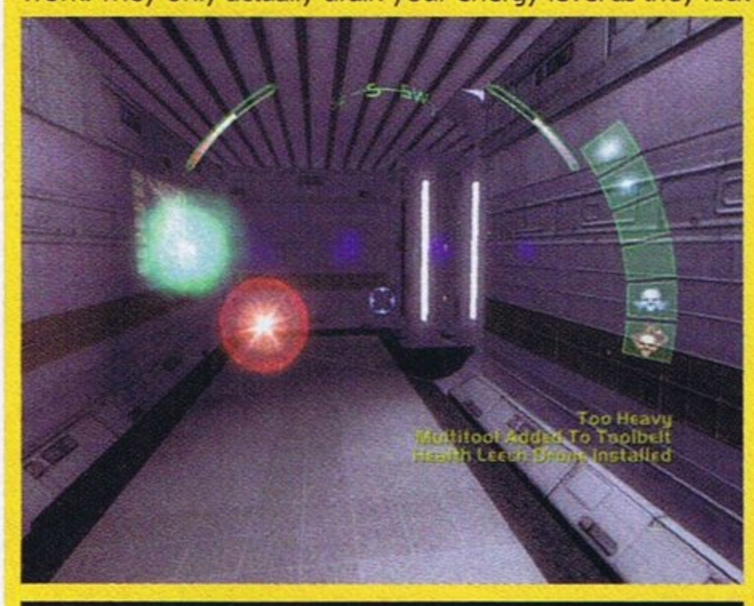
The date had gone horribly wrong.



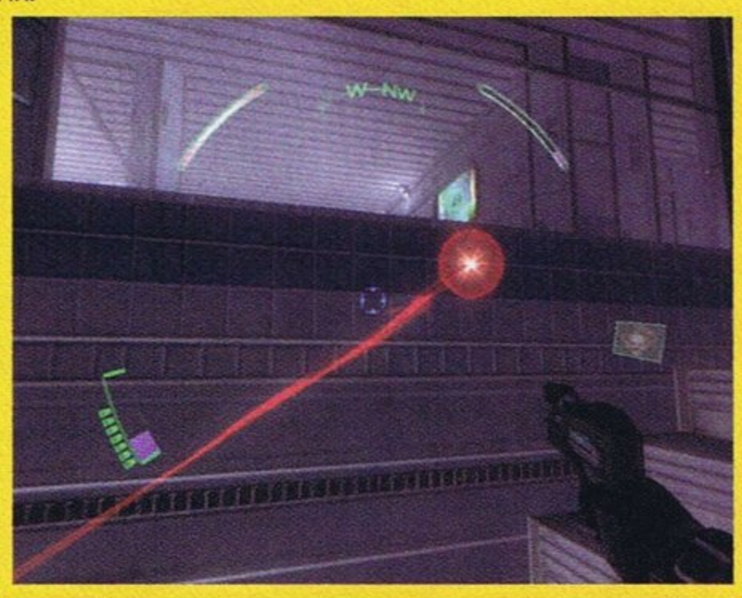
You dancing? You asking? I'm asking. Go away.

DRONE ALONE

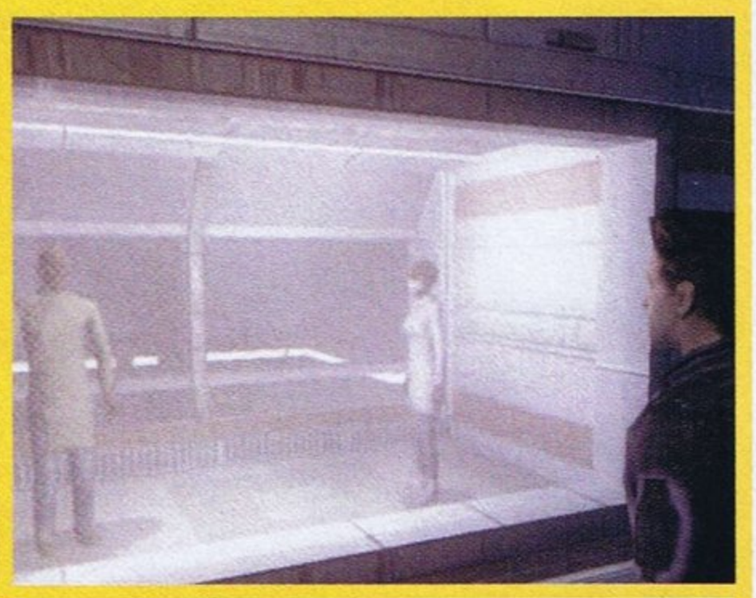
Except that they're not alone – they've bought friends. One of the new cybernetics are drone modules, which, upon activation, follow you around and wait for an opportunity to go to work. They only actually drain your energy level as they kick in.



Here's the pair I've brought for a demonstration. In green is our Bi-tox attack drone. In beautiful scarlet is our illegal biomod vampire drone.



Upon the presence of a corpse or a sleeping body, the vampire kicks into life, dissolving the body into a thick, nutritious soup and healing you.



Were these scientists hostile, my bio-toxin drone would be pelting them with drug needles. Also, the bio-hazard drone will protect you from noxious elements. Gotta love them.

Hold on. A certain segment of the audience may have noted that this isn't actually the most realistic thing in the world. Adding a doo-dah that turns any gun into an EMP weapon or an area-affect thing? You're not convinced. Well, take a seat. They've gone further and changed how ammunition operates. No longer does each weapon have a separate reservoir of bullets. Instead they all feed off a general ammunition pool at differing rates, meaning you can fire off many more bullets with a pistol than a rocket launcher with the same supplies. So is this mind-stunningly unrealistic?

Well – yes. Because *Invisible War* is a videogame.

The only question that really matters is whether this approach harms the game in terms of interactions. The answer is, no. In fact, it becomes another resource to allocate. You miss classical experience points? Well, here's a constantly moving resource to manage. Do I have the ammunition available to use my powerful weapons? Can I afford to use the EMP attack which penetrates through the walls to take out that bot, or would I be better working out some other route? Equally, all 'ammo' resources are useful and so become a general reward, rather than only a specific reward. In *Deus Ex*, if you've just used a lockpick to open a chest to find only rocket ammunition inside, it's a waste. Here, using the same trick would reveal something that could be used by anyone. Additionally, in a lovely piece of design, most chests have transparent lids to show you what treats are on offer if you use your resources to open them. Design ploys like this turn random guesswork (and a probable reload if it turns out to be useless) into an educated decision. Choice by itself means nothing. What matters is *meaningful* choice. One limitation is that when you're out of ammunition... well, you're out of ammunition. But in *Invisible War*, like its predecessor, some of the greatest moments come from improvising new tactics when resources are low – or retreating and finding some way to resupply; scavenging being another of the game's primary pillars.

"The question is what sort of game *you* want to play."

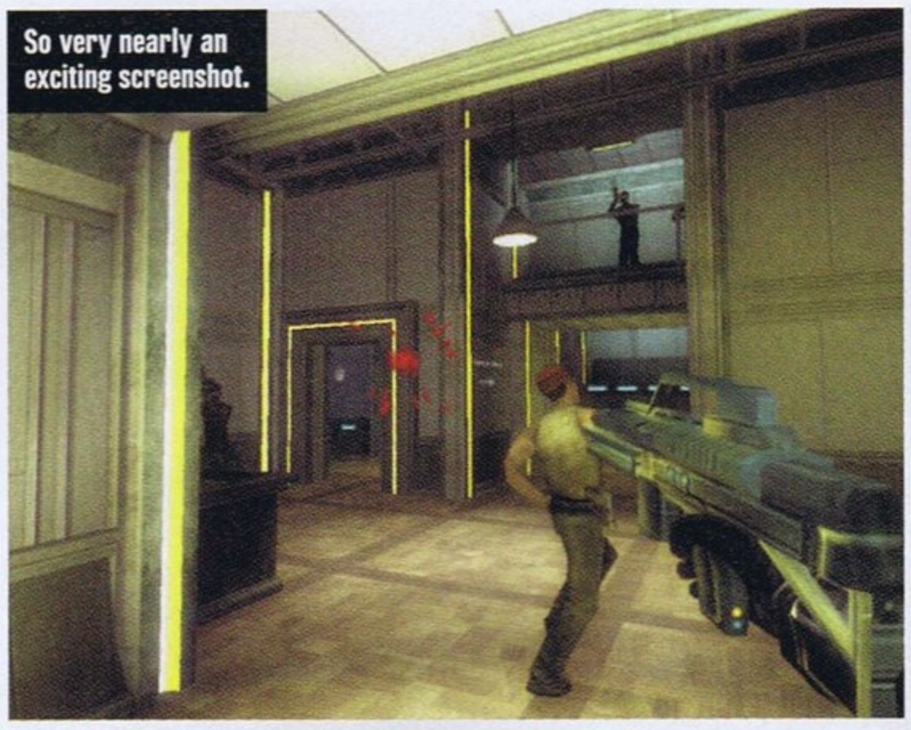
Now, we're two thirds through the review and so far it's all been measured explanations about the game's systems and the alterations made. It's got 92% – where's the mad crazy joy? Well, this is a significant game. It's important to understand the differences between what you may expect from a *Deus Ex* sequel and what's provided. The last thing I want to do is try and trick anyone into buying something they won't like. You've now had the facts on the controversial issues, or at least my most measured interpretation of them. To start my eulogy, let's go back to that opening question. What do you want? Why do you play games? And why are you specifically reading this review?

The answer is this: you want to be Somebody, because you are a Nobody. Don't worry about that. *Everyone* is a nobody. George Bush sits in the Whitehouse tapping his finger on that red big button, wishing he was someone else. He's a nobody. None of these people feel as if they make a difference.

continued over

PICK UP A PENGUIN

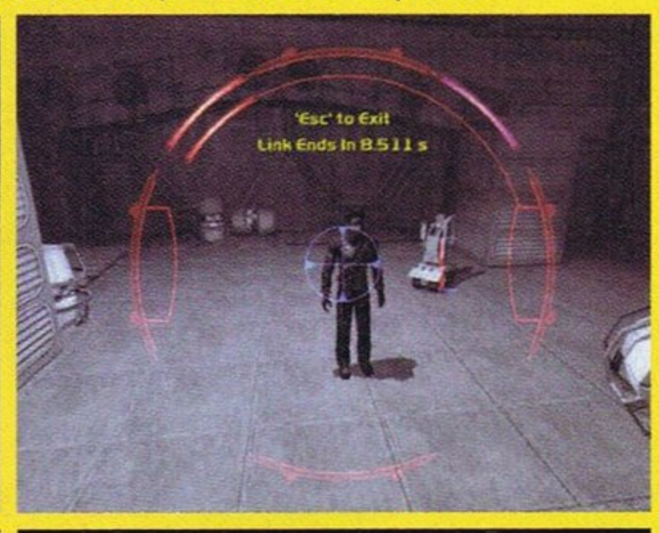
In this game, it pays to scour the level for provisions. Sadly, you cannot pick up this penguin. However, you can set it on fire, which is almost as good. Now quickly – activate cloak. The RSPCA are coming.


So very nearly an exciting screenshot.

DOMINATE ME! WHIRR-CLICK!

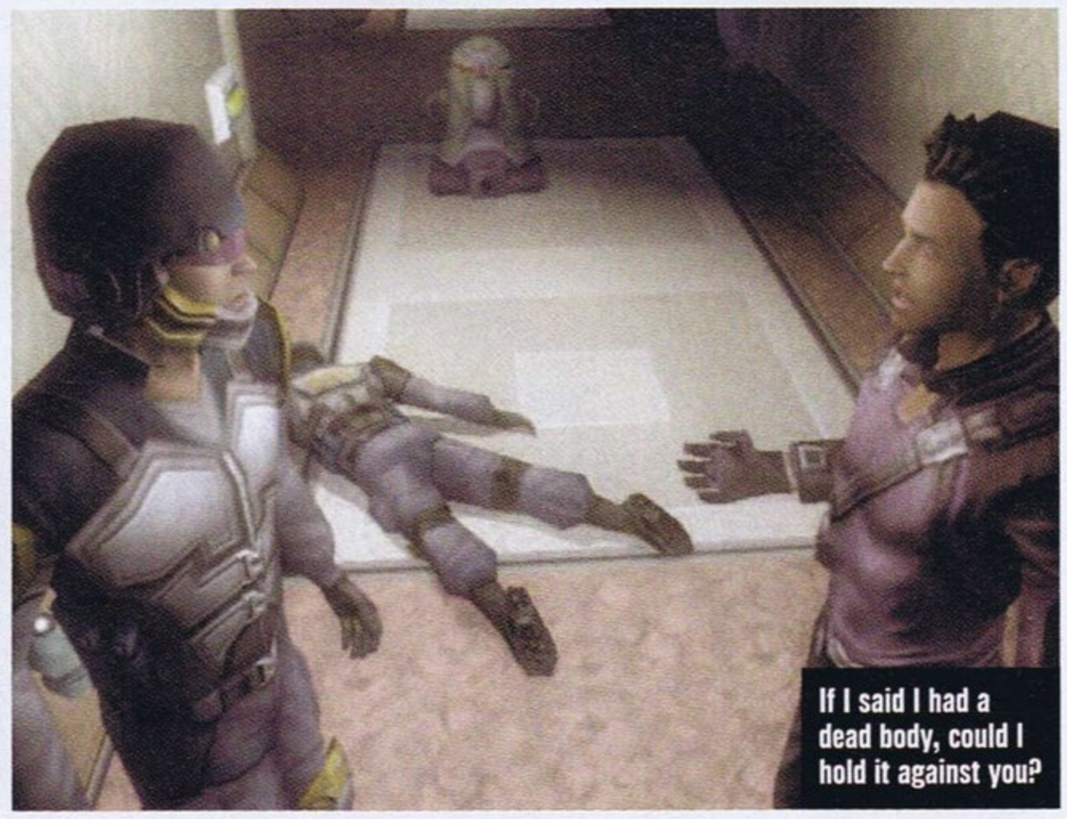
One of the more powerful new augmentations is the rather kinkily named Bot Domination ability, which allows you – after physical contact (and a delay of several seconds) – to take over its systems.

For example, take this lovely nano-assembler bot. A quick tap and...



...now I'm inside. For a while, anyway. Now... where can I find a robot with *guns*?

Nice floor tiling. We're thinking of getting that for the kitchen.

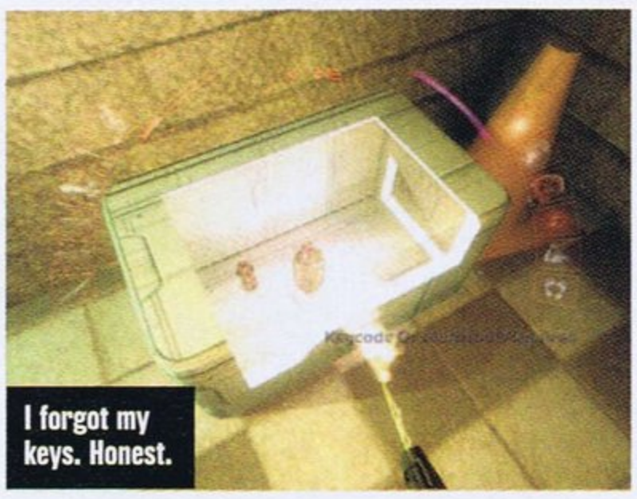

If I said I had a dead body, could I hold it against you?

NOTHING COMPARES TO BOOZE

While there remain bars in the far future, including signs advertising "booze", actually taking a sip no longer creates visual distortion. A shame, but probably lucky given our binge-drinking tendencies. More odd is that some bars – and other locations – have a weapons lock which prevents you from firing guns inside. Fair enough... but how did they put a weapons lock on my knife?

So you want to make a difference. It doesn't matter what difference – any difference will do. You want power. You want autonomy. You want to hold the world in your hands and decide whether to stroke its icy peaks or crush it between you fingers. You want what all of us expect, and are disappointed that we don't get: everything.

On that level, every game is always going to disappoint us. But, at its best, *Deus Ex: Invisible War* takes you closer to the idea of pure, unrestrained player expression than anything else. From the second to second interaction (Shall I shoot/Shall I kill, or shall I just move anywhere along the axis between the pair) to the grand sweep of the narrative, you're given meaningful input to customise the story at almost every point. Most games state "This is what you must do". *Invisible War* asks "What do you want to do?"


I forgot my keys. Honest.

For example, once the game moves from the opening linear plot section, it blossoms into an array of options and possibilities. You're dumped in the city, free to go wherever you please. Several people contact you, either ordering you or pleading with you to visit them. You can ally yourself to their cause and follow their demands exactly, chose to play both sides off against the middle or simply ignore them and wander this strange new world in which you find

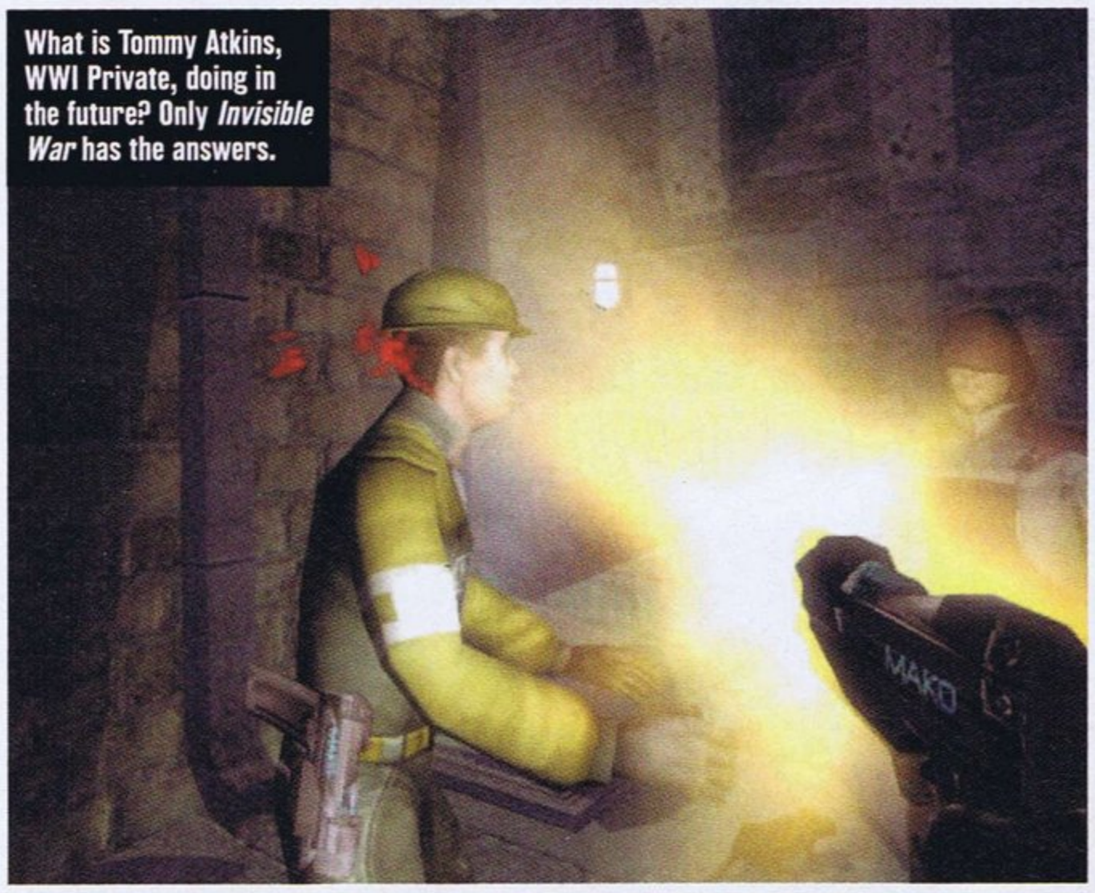
"A more vibrant and dynamic experience."

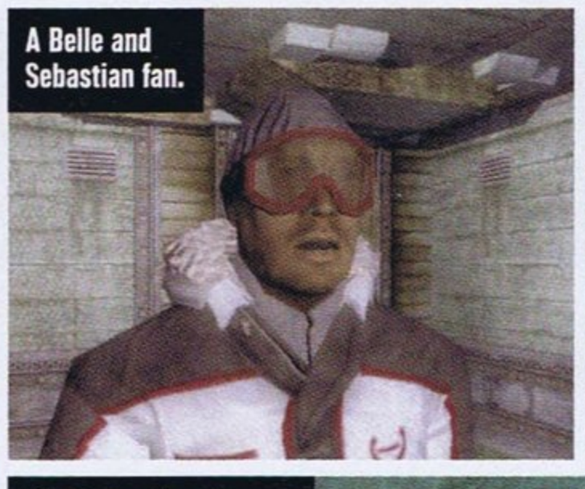
yourself. Eventually the over-arching narrative will push you towards a destination, but the route you take to get there – and even what you do when you do get there – will be totally personal.

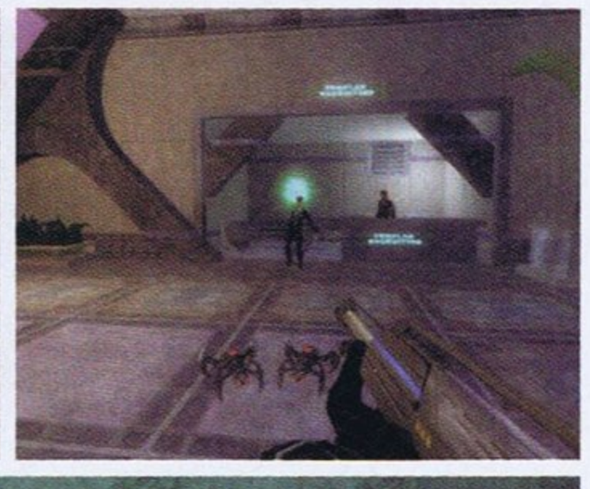
And it's exactly this aspect of free-ranging play that doesn't come across in the demo at all. While the individual sections of each level are smaller than the open expanses of the original game, *Invisible War*'s levels overall are made of about a dozen of these smaller interconnected component pieces. They're reminiscent of the Hong Kong chapter of the original game in that you're free to roam a city, but prevented from mere aimlessness by having set threads to investigate. But where *Invisible War* is even *better* than *Deus Ex* is that these objectives are often antagonistically opposed, often leading to a more vibrant and dynamic experience.

Also, in terms of narrative, *Invisible War* manages to be both more cohesive and more mature. While its predecessor often seemed happy to just lead you on a guided tour of every real-world conspiracy ever concocted, here the characters are driven, their motivations more understandable. While there isn't quite the mass of written material, the plot still deals with ideas that are as weighty as anything else in gaming. Also, for those who care about such things, the endings are more conclusively world-changing, with grander moral implications.

It's clearly great, then. So why no 95% score? The thing is, *Invisible War* has as many minor foibles around the edges as the original. The physics, as is the Havok system's tendency, have destinct moments of something-is-wrong-ness, especially when objects seem to have been programmed with less 'weight' than they should have.







SYSTEM MISER

How *Invisible War* will play on *your* PC

- Supported resolutions: **640x480 to 1280x1024**
- Scaleable options: **Multisampling (up to x6), bloom, shadow quality, light quality, character quality, vsync**

VERDICT: **Most important thing - this game is simply not compatible with cards without full pixel-shader support. This means GeForce 3 level power at a minimum. MX cards won't cut it - and that includes the Geforce 4 MX which due to cheap-skating by nVidia doesn't have the power required. This is very much a next-generation graphics game.**

You'd think that throwing a barrel into someone would hurt them instead of just annoying them... and you'd be right, but only if you've used a strength implant to add enough velocity to your missile. The AI, meanwhile, while showing an improvement, still has a tendency to just concentrate on its admittedly incredibly hard job rather than 'performing' to entertain us with tricks like making guards duck for cover or whatever. The inventory interface often seems counter-intuitive. You get used to it, but you really shouldn't have to. The world-fiction has a couple of obvious holes that you'll have to overlook. And the fact that much of what makes it great was done by *Deus Ex* first counts against it somewhat.

Most importantly, while the augmentation system does allow you to personalise your character to a huge extent, someone who explores in depth and locates all the canisters available will find themselves reaching the very height of possible character development with undue haste. You can max out your abilities by around the halfway point, leaving all future canisters to just sit around in case you fancy overwriting your abilities for something new. Extending the development tree - perhaps by having a Level 4 upgrade only possible with an extremely limited canister or something - would have improved this considerably.

But even if your character isn't evolving, your tactics and decisions are. Rarely has improvisational play been as powerful, and the possibilities as gloriously diverse as they are here. Expect increasingly baroque playing styles to emerge as people rub pieces of the toolset together. It's also telling that the genre box is almost impossible to tick here. Numbers - the standard way of defining an RPG, and the characteristic of the first game which earned it that pigeonhole, - have gone entirely. So what does that leave? I don't know. I don't really care. Genres are for wimps.

Enough. Let's end this in the manner *Invisible War*, like its predecessor, concludes. An apposite quotation: "I see now that the path I choose through that maze makes me what I am. I am not only a thing, but also a way of being - one of many ways - and knowing the paths I have followed and the ones left to take will help me understand what I am becoming." - Daniel Keyes, Flowers For Algernon.

Invisible War: Yourself, Becoming.

KIERON GILLEN

PCGA PROFILE

Invisible War is:
- **Tremendously emergent**
- **Perfect**
- **A *Deus Ex* game**

Invisible War is not:
- **An FPS**
- **Perfectly realistic**
- **Identical to the last one but with better graphics**

■ Publisher **Eidos** ■ Developer **Ion Storm** ■ Minimum System **PIII 1.2GHz, 256Mb RAM, 32Mb 3D card (pixel shader support), 2Gb HD Space** ■ Recommended **P4 1.5GHz, 512Mb RAM, 64Mb 3D card, 2Gb HD Space.** ■ Multi-Player **None** ■ Web Address **www.dxinvisiblewar.com** ■ Release Date **March**

PC GAMES addict
Yet again, more than the sum of its parts. Immersive, story-driven brilliance.
92%

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

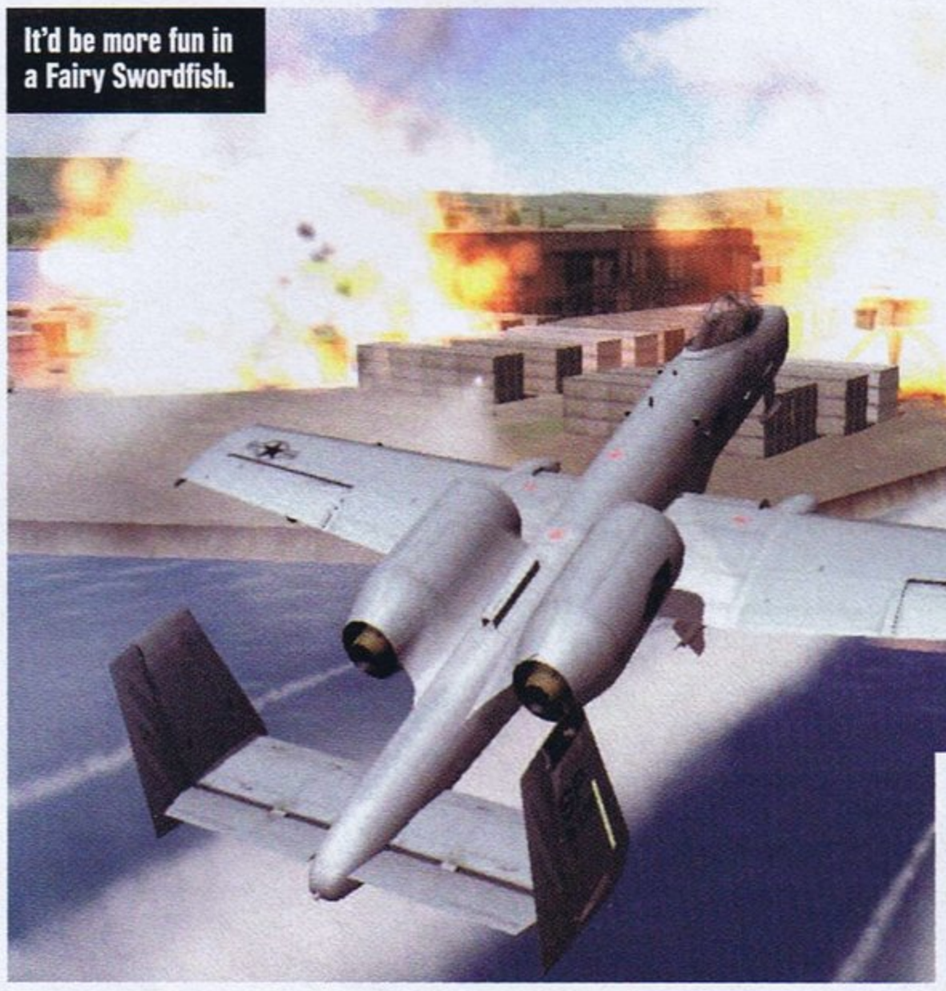
Deus Ex
Available for a fiver. If you haven't played it yet, get the hell out of our magazine. Shoo!

System Shock 2
Many similar elements to *Deus Ex*. Rather than epic, this uses intense claustrophobia.

GENRE: FLIGHT SIMULATION

LOCK ON
AIR COMBAT SIMULATION

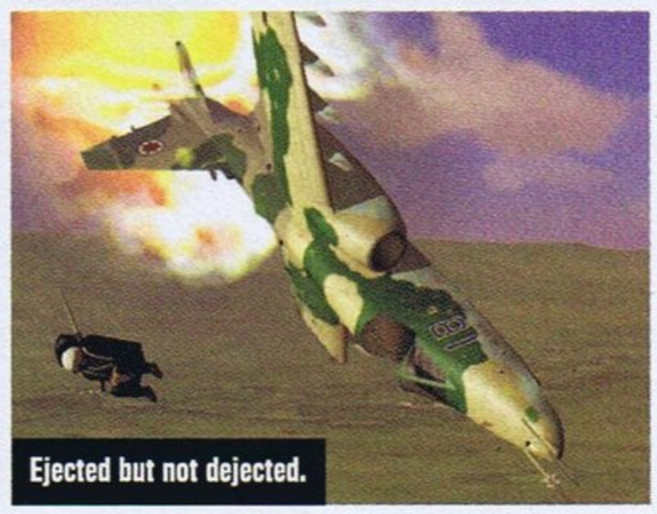
...in which pigs fly and eagles use sparrows to kill frogs.



It'd be more fun in a Fairy Swordfish.

Bandit behaviour is believable. They'll even use terrain to shake missiles.

I like my frogfoot but my girlfriend thinks it's weird.



Ejected but not dejected.

MANUAL LABOUR

No games need chunky printed manuals more than serious sims like *Lock On*. What we get instead – a skimpy pamphlet that wastes pages describing the blindingly obvious, and a printer-unfriendly PDF manual with illegible HUD diagrams – is a very poor substitute. The enterprising souls at www.lomac-manual.com have stepped in to fill the gap but their leather-bound tome with its extra training and vehicle ID sections will set you back about as much as the game itself.

YOU know those moments in job interviews when you blurt out the first thing that comes into your head and realise instantly you've blown your chances? Well I had a couple of those when interviewed for a Staff Writer's position at this very magazine a few years back. **The first was when then-editor James Ashton enquired what most influenced me when buying a games mag and I earnestly answered "The demos on the coverdisc". The second was when, scanning my application, he asked me to explain the appeal of flight sims and I proceeded to spout a lot of complete twaddle about Icarus, Koyaanisqatsi and carpet bombing.**

I didn't get the job.

Answering that second question today I hope I'd have the presence of mind to talk about the complex reality-rooted challenges that are at the heart of serious simulations like the blemished blessing that is *Lock On: ACS*. Completing a challenge where the parameters are defined by *real life* technology and physics rather than the wit and whim of a games designer brings its own unique brand of satisfaction. To those prepared to put the time in pondering the PDF manual and extensive tutorials, *Lock On* offers plenty of this kind of satisfaction.

Sadly, at present the satisfaction comes seasoned with more than a pinch of frustration, particularly for those with PCs not purchased or comprehensively upgraded within the last year or so. Feeble frame-rates – that cardinal sin among committed simmers – have been provoking some heated discussions on forums since the game's US release and will undoubtedly cause consternation for some in Australia. Even on the athletic Athlon64 rig on which most of the playtesting for this review was conducted, there were times when the action noticeably faltered. On another system just shy of the declared recommended spec the only way to get practical FPS was to sacrifice most of the graphical glitz evident in the shots above and run the game at an archaic 800x600 resolution.

"There's much here to cherish and build upon."

Given the boggling variety of PC set-ups it's always difficult to talk meaningfully about performance, but it does seem clear that *Lock On* is unusually demanding. Do not expect the fleetness or fluency of *Forgotten Battles* or *FS2004* from this one. Hopefully the inevitable patch will add extra speed and smoothness and bash the bugs that are currently troubling transatlantic customers. Multiplayer stability and warping, Win98 problems, sound issues, forgetful option screens, faults with SAM behaviour and the F-15 radar, occasional lock-ups and crashes... considering the gestation period of this project I did anticipate a little more spit and polish.

Of course, anyone with any knowledge of the genre will know that bugs and sky-high system requirements don't exclude a title from later induction into The Sim Hall of Fame – in fact they're almost prerequisite. *Lock On* has strength where it matters. Authoritative flight models, a charismatic and large (for a jet sim) roster of rides, graphics that no other air combat sim except *FB* can compete with... yes, there's much here to cherish and build upon.

More effort could have been made to pander to fledgling fliers but there are numerous toggleable realism options, a simplified radar, and – perhaps the best aids of all – the startlingly straightforward Su-25 Frogfoot and similarly simple A-10A Warthog to help get greenhorns started. That pug-ugly pair are also the perfect crossover crates for those weaned on WWII warbirds. Huge fun to fight and fly, they relish just the kind of low-level

HOG HEAVEN

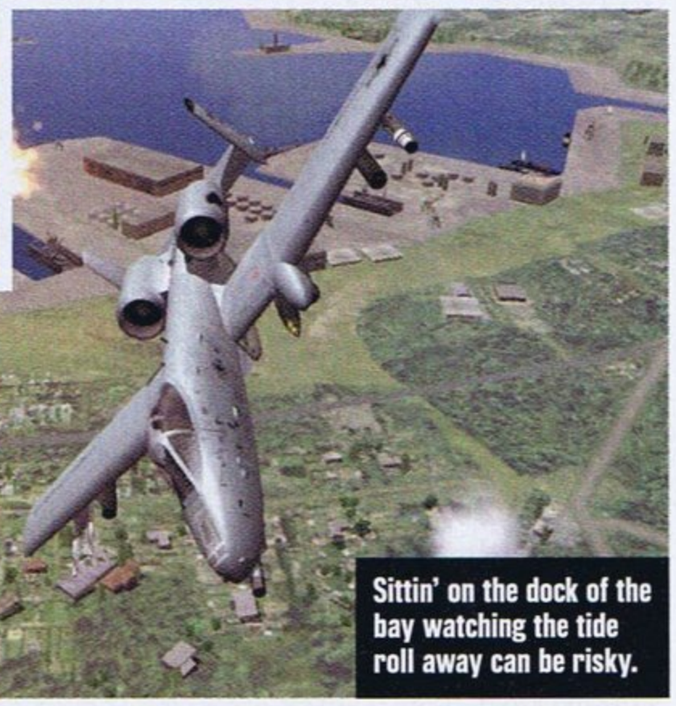
Forget the flashy fighters, the real star of this show is the A-10A Warthog. Like its porcine namesake it's no oil painting, is equally at home in forest and savannah, and lives on a diet of grass, berries and Warsaw Pact armoured vehicles.

A SAM in the can will really ruin your day, so when they're about it's best to stand-off and strike with Maverick guided missiles.

Cluster bombs like the Rockeye are the sawn-off shotgun of aerial ordnance. Missing with these eggs takes plenty of practice.

When wing pylons are bare the fun doesn't stop. Poking from the hog's snout is the Avenger 30mm 4200 rpm rotary cannon.

Naturally ED have included flyable Flankers.



Sittin' on the dock of the bay watching the tide roll away can be risky.

An eagle and a bogey. So one under par then.

Hog roast.

SYSTEM MISER

How *Lock On* will play on *your* PC

- Supported resolutions: **800x600 to 1600x1200**
- Scaleable options: **Colour depth, textures, scenery, shadows, lights, effects, haze, water, cockpit mirrors and reflections.**

VERDICT: Unless you can tolerate frame-rates in the teens and below, blurry textures and jagged edges, play on minimum spec machines is not recommended. Even on rec spec machines you will almost certainly need to make sacrifices to keep things fluid. Many useful tips on tweaking graphic options can be found on the official forum at lo-mac.com.

Warthog

mischief-making that shows off the lovely terrain most effectively.

At 100ft and Mach 1, the sprawling forests, the shelterbelts, the snaking powerlines, the factory smokestacks, the oil derricks and the cranes of the Black Sea theatre dash past so fast you barely get time to admire just how naturalistically they nestle on the photo-derived ground textures. Occasionally the 'pop-up' of a larger piece of scenery offends the eye but the overall effect is excellent. Glinting sea textures are particularly stunning. Upstairs, where the other three (six if you count variants) flyables prefer to frolic, the view is equally splendid.

Soaring at dusk or dawn among soft sliver-fringed clouds is particularly memorable, especially when you glance about and see the sun rays catching the tiny scratches on the canopy. The cockpits themselves are visual triumphs but regrettably don't respond to mouse manipulation. Without a joystick bristling with buttons, the keyboard fumbling can be considerable.

Avionic fidelity is not quite on a par with the famed *Falcon* 4 but will be complex and convincing enough for most. Less flattering to *Lock On* is a comparison of these two titles' campaign games. In addition to the standard single sortie selection, fast furball fabricator and full blown editor, the young gun provides short, scripted mission sequences with little sense of context or consequence where the old master provides an involving, organic war zone.

With a better campaign system and higher frame-rates the respectable scarlet score below might well have contained another '8'. Even without them I'd recommend all aspiring Mavericks and Gooses have a gander. Despite the flaws, *Lock On* serves up sights and sensations that – outside of Iraq and Chechnya – you just can't get anywhere else right now.

TIM STONE

PCGA PROFILE

Lock On is:
- **Needy**
- **Needed**
- **Attractive**

Lock On is not:
- **That polished**
- **Imaginative**
- **To be confused with *Lock-In*, the pub management sim**

■ Publisher **Ubi Soft** ■ Developer **Eagle Dynamics** ■ Minimum System **PIII 800, 256Mb RAM, 32Mb 3D card**
■ Recommended **PIII 2GHz, 512Mb RAM, 128Mb 3D card, joystick** ■ Multi-Player **LAN, Internet, 32 players**
■ Web Address **www.lo-mac.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

PC GAMES addict
Thaws the frozen corpse of the jet sim genre with its raging afterburners.
78%

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Falcon 4.0
Fantastic but fiendishly complex. Five years on it's still unmatched in many respects.

Strike Fighters: Project 1
Fans are fast running out of patience waiting for the promised patch.

GENRE: ARCADE ADVENTURE

THE HOBBIT

In a hole in the ground, there lived a Hobbit. He should have stayed there.

THEY couldn't have timed this game's release better if they tried. What with Peter Jackson's much-anticipated third film going great guns at cinemas around the world, and EA's *The Return of the King* game whetting PC gamer appetites for all things Middle-Earth, *The Hobbit* is in a good position to ride these respective coat-tails all the way to the bank. Whether it deserves to is another matter.

Faithfully following the plot of Tolkien's much loved children's tale, you must guide Bilbo Baggins through levels based on his more memorable adventures. You'll fight spiders in Mirkwood, tiptoe around trolls and rescue dwarves in barrels on your way to the dragon's hoard in the Lonely Mountain.

Peek at the score and you'll know that *The Hobbit* is little more than average in every respect. The game's mixture of stealth, platform and hack-'n'-slash combat is dished-up with equally mixed results. Stealth is perhaps the most successful feature: donning the Ring turns Bilbo invisible for a limited time, allowing him to sneak about unnoticed. The usual tactics of avoiding line of sight and ducking behind convenient scenery also work well, though it's all a bit undemanding. The platform sections, of which there are many, are equally straightforward. Pull switches, collect random items, try to stay awake. The camera mostly behaves itself, but on occasion demands a leap of faith, and hinders your distance-judging skills.

Combat is the weakest part of the mix. Though it starts out as simple, straightforward hack-'n'-slash, things take

"Fight spiders, and tiptoe around trolls."

a turn for the worse with multiple enemies on screen. Though you can switch targets, a lock-on system is badly needed. This, combined with Bilbo's lack of pace or dynamic movement (yes, he's a Hobbit, but that's no excuse), makes combat a chore. Even the most aggressive arachnid-hater will tire of running in circles around Mirkwood's ceaseless spiders.

Not that *The Hobbit* is terrible. There are some nice graphical effects, the best of which is the glow from Sting, Bilbo's sword. But the star of the novel was the dragon, Smaug, and the same applies here. His clipped English tones and mocking remarks make his appearance thoroughly enjoyable.

Simply put, however, *The Hobbit* is a stripped down version of *The Legend of Zelda* games on the N64 and GameCube. The comparison is both inevitable, given how much has been lifted from the Nintendo titles, and unfavourable, as *The Hobbit* lacks significantly in every area.

It's difficult to see who this game is aimed at. Its flaws will frustrate the younger gamer, its simplicity will bore gaming elders. I fear it is actually aimed at either unsuspecting parents, lost among a daunting shelf of unrecognisable titles, or Tolkien completists. Though the latter may enjoy the setting, this title is simply too average to be recommended.

JUDE NICHOLAS

THERE AND BACK AGAIN

The cut-scenes deserve mention, doing a fine job of bringing the novel to life. It's a shame, however, that the cut-scenes seem to contain *all* the fun. This is a game that forces gaming cliché into a Hobbit-shaped story, rather than making original, imaginative use of the licence.

PCGA PROFILE

The Hobbit is:
- **Average in every way**
- **Diet *Zelda***
- **Full of nasty spiders**

The Hobbit is not:
- **Complete rubbish**
- **Unfaithful to the novel**
- **Worth paying to play**

■ Publisher **Vivendi Interactive** ■ Developer **Sierra Entertainment** ■ Minimum System **PIII 450, 64Mb RAM, 1.5Gb HD space, 32Mb 3D card** ■ Recommended **PIII 1GHz, 256Mb RAM** ■ Multi-Player **None**
■ Web Address **www.hobbitgames.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Prince of Persia: Sands of Time
Platforms, puzzles, and adventure, along with lovely graphics and pointy slippers.

The Hulk
Why play a puny weakling when you can hit people over the head with tanks?

PC GAMES addict
Not remotely Hobbit-forming. A most unremarkable adventure.
60%

THE 2004 ANNUAL

Mixed by Mark Dynamix and John Course

Featuring

Benny Benassi	Groove Armada	Ferry Corsten
Linus Loves	Cam Farrar	Rogue Traders
Planet Funk	Bad Cabbage	The Supermen Lovers
Room 5	Lee Cabrera	Deepest Blue
+ So Much Love To Give		www.ministryofsound.com.au

2 x CD
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GENRE: ACTION ADVENTURE

BEYOND GOOD & EVIL

A sexy French girl going out with a pig. Some things never change.

Jade's Venice-like home city.

Whack! Monstrous bugs provide boss-type characters.

THE COMPUTER HAS A COMPUTER

What you don't see among all these snazzy screenshots is that much of the game is dependent on Jade's lovely inventory system. A core part of this is the photo-album, which you fill up with a menagerie of animal life from across the planet. Maps, e-mails and various info-sources are also dealt with by this extremely well-presented system.

IF you need one reason to buy this game, then I'll give you this: green lipstick. My sinister paymasters, however, demand that I provide a wide selection of pros and cons. So if you need one reason *not* to buy it, I'll give you this: it's too easy. Too easy for me, yes, and perhaps too easy for you. But for the other 87.5% of people in this world it's going to seem like perfection. *Beyond Good & Evil* is a well-judged and hugely compelling sci-fi adventure. And it's not very often I get to say that.

It's quite European too, despite the American voice acting. It's like Amelie's big sister went to Hollywood and became an action hero. The central character, Jade, outclasses all other female protagonists, including a certain icon whom we won't mention anymore, in every possible way. Her sidekick, a lovely old pig-man with fart-powered jet-boots, is the perfect foil to her jaw-dropping independent woman act. She fights, she sneaks, she puzzle-solves. But she sure as hell doesn't platform jump. That's right: no crappy jumping. Whenever Jade leaps, or climbs, or pulls herself over an obstacle, it's done automatically, seamlessly. Imagine the frustrating moments avoided, the stupid pixel-perfect jumping puzzles side-stepped. It's just wonderful.

Super action? Yes indeed.

"It's like *Amelie*'s big sister went to Hollywood"

And all this from the imagination of the man who created *Rayman*! I know! I could hardly believe it either.

Anyway, Jade and pig-bloke are living on a distant planet that's a bit like a kind of ultra-tech space Venice, complete with canals, an interstellar conspiracy, hovercraft races, media-propaganda, power-armoured oppressors, alien creatures and monstrous invaders. The streets and canals are filled with colourful characters, while the caves and abandoned mines are packed with nasty thugs and alien beasties. One minute you're shopping in the Rasta-Rhino hovercraft-shop, the next you're racing through underground tunnels, battling a cheeky thief. There are sub-games, off-plot challenges, and always the chance to explore beyond the events which the story ensures you must run into. *Beyond Good & Evil* is plugged directly into a creative thought-hydrant and sprays ideas at your brain through a monstrous pixel-hose.

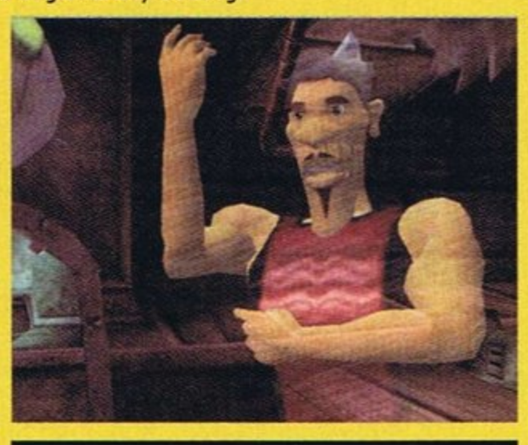
Take, for example, the way in which most of the action involves more than one character. It's fairly simplistic, but the manner in which the AI character co-operates with Jade and undertakes simple actions is simply delightful. They'll help out in fights too, which are equally straightforward, but filled with special moves and the kind of dynamism that means you're always pleased when you get a chance to vanquish the blighters via Jade's aikido staff. There are even elements of 'bullet-time' and dramatic use of slow motion to make the fight scenes even more exhilarating.

More interesting still is Jade's camera. This object is absolutely integral to the plot of the game. Jade makes money by photographing wildlife, but she also uses the camera as a weapon for truth, employing her photographic evidence to expose the space-conspiracy being

PEOPLE AND FACES

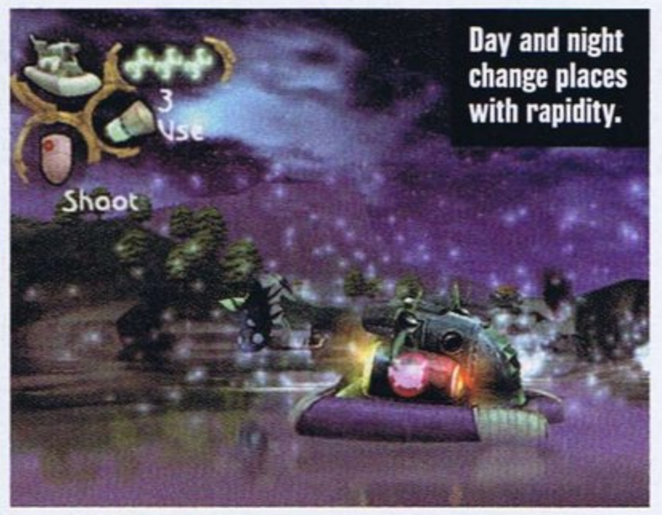
The characters in *Beyond Good & Evil* range from being wincingly clichéd to really rather entertaining. While there are a few clanging lines about the place, the dialogue is generally strong.

The Rhinos, friendly rip-off merchants, help you upgrade your hovercraft.

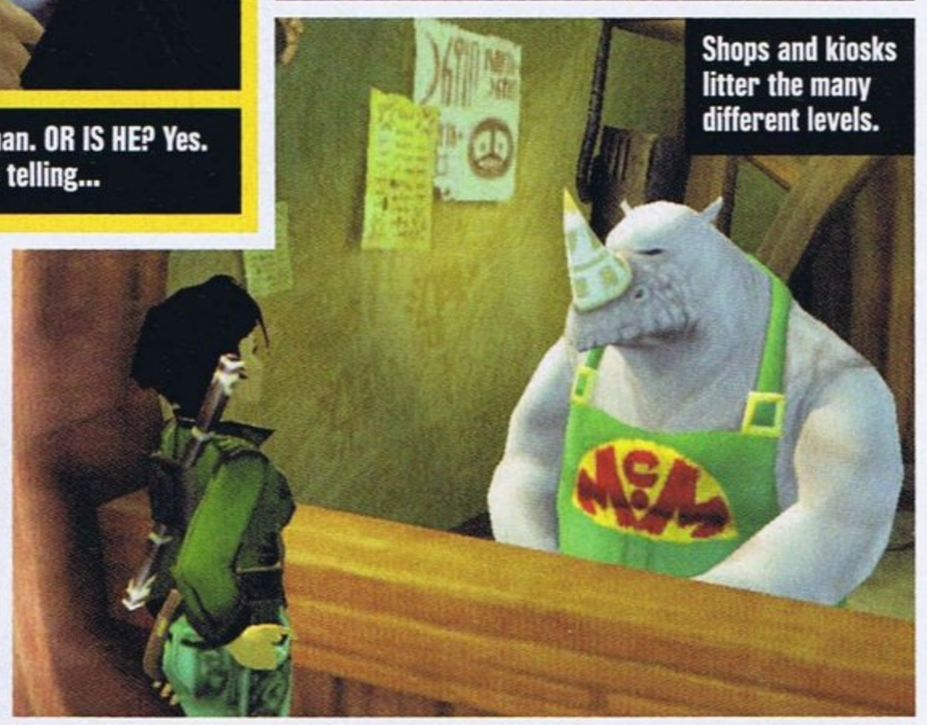


The menu and inventory are hosted by this hackneyed holographic Spaniard.

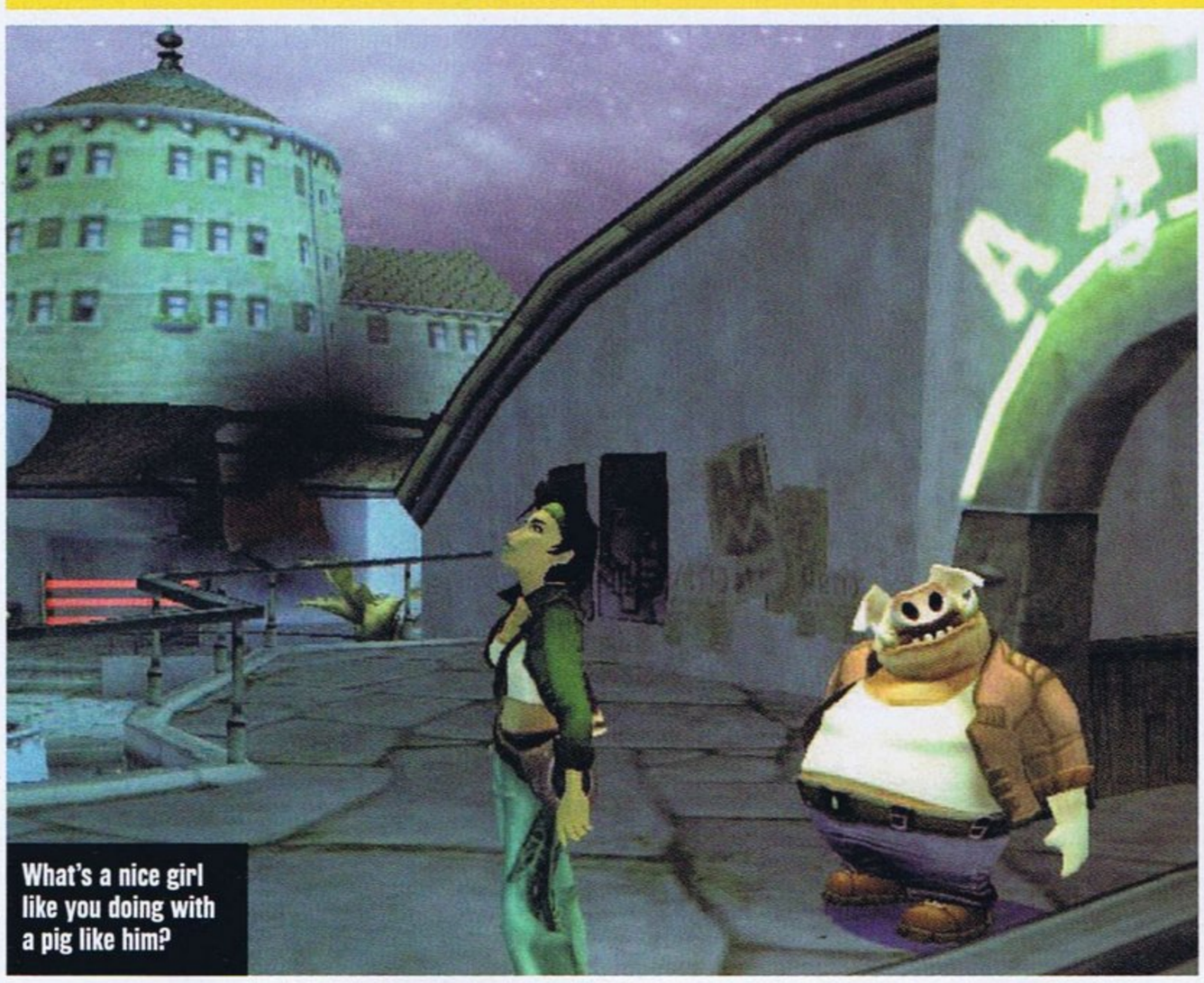
This fellow is a bad man. OR IS HE? Yes. No. Ah, that would be telling...



Day and night change places with rapidity.



Shops and kiosks litter the many different levels.



What's a nice girl like you doing with a pig like him?

SYSTEM MISER

How *Beyond Good & Evil* will play on your PC

- Supported resolutions: **640x480 to 1024x768**
- Scaleable options: **Particle effects, shadows**

VERDICT: **High-end machines will be capable of making *Beyond Good & Evil* look lovely. Some of the environmental design is outstanding, with gas effects and lighting cleverness aplenty. It'll run smoothly on lower end machines with the visuals knocked down a peg, as the various areas are small (clearly an artefact of this games' console-centric development).**

Mesmeric

perpetrated by the local robo-soldiers. This is a game in which a photojournalist is taking on the hypocrisy of the system using a *wireless, Internet-enabled, digital camera*. Isn't that just *so* 2003?

Of course, it's the plot that is fundamental to any linear adventure game like this, and that fares well here too. It uses the simple trick of creating characters you care about and making bad things happen to them, but hey, it works. There's nothing ground-breaking here, nothing that will really take your breath away, but it's so slickly presented that you'll just keep on playing, instinctively unfolding the story of Jade and her involvement in the defeat of cosmic wickedness.

The jokes could be funnier and, as with almost all third-person games from the beginning of time, it'd be preferable if the in-game camera was smoother. The game could also be a little trickier in places, as it often leaves you thinking 'is that it?' The controls of the hovercraft (which you pilot between game-areas) are in need of a million man-hours of work too. Then there are a few further problems here and there, especially with endlessly recycled dialogue and the lack of useful suggestions from NPC characters. There's almost no replay value and the lack of challenge in combat and puzzle solving will leave the 'hardcore' gamers feeling a little cold. Worse still, it's too short and most people will be able to complete it within a week of casual play.

But there's so much to like about this game that I can't help but recommend it. (It's almost as if Ubi Soft have once again *deliberately* set out to foil our comments about cross-platform development being a bad thing.) Sure, *Broken Sword 3* is a better adventure game, and there are plenty of superior action games on the PC, but *Beyond Good & Evil* provides a commendable blend all of its own. Inexplicably, as I write this, I am trawling some Dutch forums, seeing whether I can understand their foreign speak. So far, in a thread headed '*Beyond Good & Evil* screenshots', I have only understood one post. It reads: "BORING". And now, having seen more than screenshots, I can say for certain that the author of said phrase, one 'Viper_XXL', couldn't be more wrong.

JIM ROSSIGNOL

PCGA PROFILE

Beyond Good & Evil is:
- **Beautiful**
- **Colourful**
- **Simplistic**

Beyond Good & Evil is not:
- **Mature like *Max***
- **Rubbish like *Rayman***
- **Lauded like Lara**

- Publisher **Ubi Soft** ■ Developer **In House** ■ Minimum System **PIII 700, 128Mb RAM, 3D Card**
- Recommended **1Ghz CPU, 256Mb RAM, Geforce 3 or better** ■ Multi-Player **None**
- Web Address **www.ubi.com/UK/Games/beyondgoodandevil** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Broken Sword 3
Brilliantly executed adventure with a 3D engine and splendidly realised characters.

Prince of Persia
By golly, it's a decent platform action title, complete with time-cleverness.

PC GAMES addict
A beautiful and rewarding work of videogame adventure, if a tad simplistic.

82%

GENRE: REAL-TIME STRATEGY

MAGIC: THE GATHERING BATTLEGROUNDS

All hands on deck for the ultimate conversion. The card game is dead. Long live the videogame.

The magma giant's a potent force. Almost volcanic.

Fear black magic. Or purple, in this case.

Overwhelm the enemy first. Then tickle him when his defences are down. Something like that.

20 POINTS TO SUCCESS

Every warrior has 20 health points. One of the best strategies you can muster is to actually sacrifice a portion of your health early on in a round, saving your strength for the larger monsters. It'll be worth it when you let loose a mighty ape in your opponent's area, while he's only got a a stack of simpering goblins. Of course, if he or she heads down the same route, you're going to be caught in a deadly arms race.

THE purists are going to go berserk over this. Rather than a straight interpretation of the *Magic: The Gathering* collectable card game, Atari are offering something rather different, an action/strategy hybrid that plays closer to a frantic beat-'em-up than a sedate card game. That's controversial. The purists are going to be riled. "Real time?" they'll cry. "Fast-paced? What were they thinking? We don't understand. We're scared."

That's their problem. We don't care about their card game. But the videogame is fascinating, and close to genius.

This is how it works. You face off against an opponent across a square court, but rather than attacking directly, you cast spells to summon creatures. They then waddle across, heading in a straight line to your opponent. If they meet another creature, they fight. The winner will live to waddle for another cycle while the loser is removed from the gameboard. But if the path is clear, the surviving monster will start scrapping with the enemy wizard, causing a little bit of damage. You're allowed to make brief incursions into the enemy side, but if you linger for too long, you'll be punished. Cause 20 points of damage, and you'll win. If you're looking for a simple analogy, try monster tennis.

Sharp

There's a top soil of surface complexity to scrape off, mind. Rather than just summoning creatures at will, you need to manage a mana supply. This falls as big white glowing orbs, on either side of the pitch. If you're clever you can nip across the divide and pinch some from right under your opponent's nose. In the meantime, destroyed creatures drop mana-shards, little white stones that you step on. The big balls let you hold more mana while the little shards accelerate its replenishment. Confused yet? Well, that's just the basics.

"Looking for an analogy? Try monster tennis."

You're allowed to bring ten spells to the brawl, from a pool of hundreds. They're split into sub-categories – so, if you wanted to create a deviant elf, or a rampant goblin, you'd tap 'Creatures,' followed by 'Elvish Warrior'. Then, if you had the mana left over, you'd cast a modifier. Maybe an 'Enormous Growth', or 'Rampage' spell, turning your teeny tree into an Ent-ertaining orc crusher. This system has been developed for the Xbox alongside the PC so there's absolutely no mouse control. You certainly don't click icons; instead, you're hammering the keyboard, and that's why *Battlegrounds* feels so engaging: you feel absolutely connected with what's happening on screen.

There's a limit to how many creatures you can hold, so you need to pick your fights, and fighters, carefully. The more powerful creatures consume vast quantities of mana, so occasionally you'll find yourself with an empty hand, and up against enemy troops. But certain monsters have special abilities – the magma giant, for instance,

DUEL CONTROLLER

Magic? Mana? What does it all mean? Don't panic. There's a simple way of explaining it all. **1)** Your health. If this drops to zero, it's the end of the round. **2)** Your current mana supply. How many dots determines the strength of the spells you can cast. When these aren't lit up, you're going to have to rely on weaker monsters. **3)** You can cast enchantments, that modify how monsters attack. If you were to leave a gratuitous violence in here, all your creatures would have that little extra brawling ability. **4)** That's you, that is. When will fantasy artists realise that metal underwear tends to chafe? **5)** When your creatures win a scrap, they respawn from these little dots. When they lose, the dots fade away. **6)** Instruments of destruction. Or in this case, piddly little goblins.

Hairy chests prove vulnerable to fire spells.

Three onto one. That's fair.

causes six hit points damage to every creature on the board, including your own wizard. Rather than take a pummelling from an overburdened elf army, you can pull this behemoth from your wizard's hat, turning the tables in one fell swoop.

As with the card game, there are five colours of magic, each with its own unique spells and creatures. To unlock new magic and manifestations, you'll need to trudge through the single-player quest mode. The problem is that it's simply too difficult to be fun. You want to play, because you want to develop your magic, but instead you spend hours on one level, trying to cut past overpowered enemies. Most scenarios put you at a disadvantage, against, say, a fully charged magician, and leave you to it.

It's the special abilities that turn this game from a middling button masher, into something with considerable intellectual challenge. You find yourself working on your spellbook before a match, considering how the enchantments interlock, how to combine their effects. Do you gamble everything on one mega unit, letting it plough through the enemy lines, or do you craft a minor army, casting direct damage from behind a front of rampaging goblins?

Understand that you're faced with these kind of decisions every other second. Rounds rarely extend past the two-minute mark, and can be decided within 45 seconds if you're clever, or if your opponent trips up on his mana management. It sounds impossibly complicated, but isn't. You're provided with just enough information to make the choice without pause. When you see an opportunity, you can exploit it in the *same* second.

Battlegrounds is good, and close to being extremely good indeed. As an online game it succeeds brilliantly. When you get caught in a focused duel, against a favoured opponent, and pull a rabbit from the hat, scraping victory, it feels absolutely electric. But, it's not a game that you can sit and play for hours – the duels can be exhausting, while the single-player campaign is an obtuse and unsatisfying trudge. But the core, the basic game flow, is gorgeous; so primal, so satisfying. The purists won't care of course. But we do.

TIM EDWARDS

SYSTEM MISER

How *Battlegrounds* will play on *your* PC

- Supported resolutions: **640x480 to 2048x1536**
- Scaleable options: **None**

VERDICT: **This has been developed in tandem with an Xbox version, but unlike *Halo* doesn't seem to suffer for it. There's little slowdown, mainly because the levels are kept deliberately simple, there's no extraneous architecture to cause your system to crumble. If you're running on a minimum system, you'll be stuck with the lowest resolution, but it's barely noticeable.**

The battle lines are drawn. In chalk. Like hopscotch.

Both of these wizards are saving up for something big. Possibly.

PCGA PROFILE

Battlegrounds is:
- **Real time**
- **Tactical**
- **Inspired by the card game**

Battlegrounds is not:
- **Turn based**
- **Sedate**
- **Based entirely on the card game**

- Publisher **Atari** ■ Developer **Secret Level** ■ Minimum System **PIII 800, 128Mb RAM, 1.4Gb HD space, 32Mb 3D card** ■ Recommended **64Mb 3D card** ■ Multi-Player **LAN, Internet, single PC, two players**
- Web Address **www.mtggame.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Magic: The Gathering Online
Included with the card game's starter packs. The purists should stick to this.

Sacrifice
A similar concept; summon creatures that you send off to bash heads.

PC GAMES addict
A compelling and brave interpretation, let down by an obtuse single-player mode.
84%

DANCE DANCE

GENRE: RHYTHM ACTION

Do you have twinkle toes or spare shapes to throw?

Pretty swirling Laura Ashley wallpaper. Nice.

Self-captioning screenshots. Awesome!

COUNTING THE CALORIES

When you've danced your heart out to each song, you're presented with the amount of calories you've theoretically burnt. In the course of one afternoon, it can completely change your attitude to dieting. You start to read the back of packets of Twisties Cheese O's, checking to see how many times you'll have to play through "Can't Get You Out Of My Head". Seven, for the record.

PCGA PROFILE

Dance Dance Dance is:
- Active
- Sweaty
- Hot pants

Dance Dance Dance is not:
- Sedate
- Dull
- Pants

Stunted

JUST as *Dance Dance Dance* arrived for review, the sensational news broke that the world endurance record for playing *Dance Dance Revolution Extreme* had been shattered. **Drew Gamble, a 17-year-old from Oregon, had bemanied himself for 37 and a half hours. Imagine it. 37 hours, continuous motion, cherry pop in your ears. Now that's endurance gaming.**

Dance Dance Dance is 'inspired by' the *Dance Dance Revolution* series in the same way that Home Brand Cola is inspired by Coca-Cola. You step on the four corners of a dance mat, as directed by arrows floating to the top of your PC screen. The directions are set to the beat of a cherry-pop classic; so, suddenly, you're not just making absurd foot-patterns, you're tapping your toes in time to music. You're stylish. You're oh-so cool. You're dancing.

Here's what's in this package. Firstly, cover tracks. The developers haven't bothered to pay the fees for any official tunes. Instead, they've hired middle-of-the-road studio artists to put a beat to some sugar coated songs. Highlights include a handbag house version of "Teenage Dirtbag" and a ropey recording of "I'm Not a Girl, Not Yet A Woman," originally performed by a certain Ms Spears.

"A chance to enjoy the poetry of pistons."

Then you get the mat itself. It's a sexy vinyl number, and smells faintly of marker pen. It's got non-slip pads, but even so, you'll need to take your shoes and socks off. Otherwise, you'll career across the floor, causing damage to yourself and nearby household pets. Beware. It plugs into the PC via the keyboard port, using a pass-through cable. Amusingly, you can also use it to control your favourite games. We tried a quick session of *Battlefield 1942*, just to see if it works. It does. Now, even the Tiger Tank found its Tiger feet.

The software feels cheap. That's an observation which will put some people off. The front-end, where you select the next song, feels pre-PlayStation. The visualisations, meant to occupy your eyes while your feet do the work, are functional at best – there's no characterisation or exuberance, just swirling colours and flashing lights.

But it's the dance patterns, ie. the arrows you move your feet to, that prove most disappointing. They feel workmanlike, functional. Good sequences in other games of the type make you feel in tune with the music, like you can almost predict the next step. You never feel that way in *Dance Dance Dance*. The patterns are fine, supremely taxing, but never inspiring.

And that sentiment runs through the entire package. It's a mediocre dance game, but one of the few for the PC. If you're serious about dancing the night away, then dismiss this and invest in a PSone and a copy of *DDR*. But, if you're after cheap, throwaway thrills, consider this. Just don't expect to be playing it for 37 hour stretches.

TIM EDWARDS

■ Publisher **Logic Three** ■ Developer **Fix N Wolf** ■ Minimum System **Pentium 233Mhz or compatible, 64Mb RAM, 650Mb hard drive space, PS/2 Keyboard Port Connection** ■ Multi-Player **Two players, with additional mat** ■ Web Address **www.spectravideo.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Let's Dance Europe
More dancing antics. Out of stock now, but included for completeness.

Geting largered and going clubbing
Entertaining for a few hours, but punishing in the long run.

PC GAMES addict
The lambada of dancing games. Embarrassing, but ludicrous enough to raise a smile.

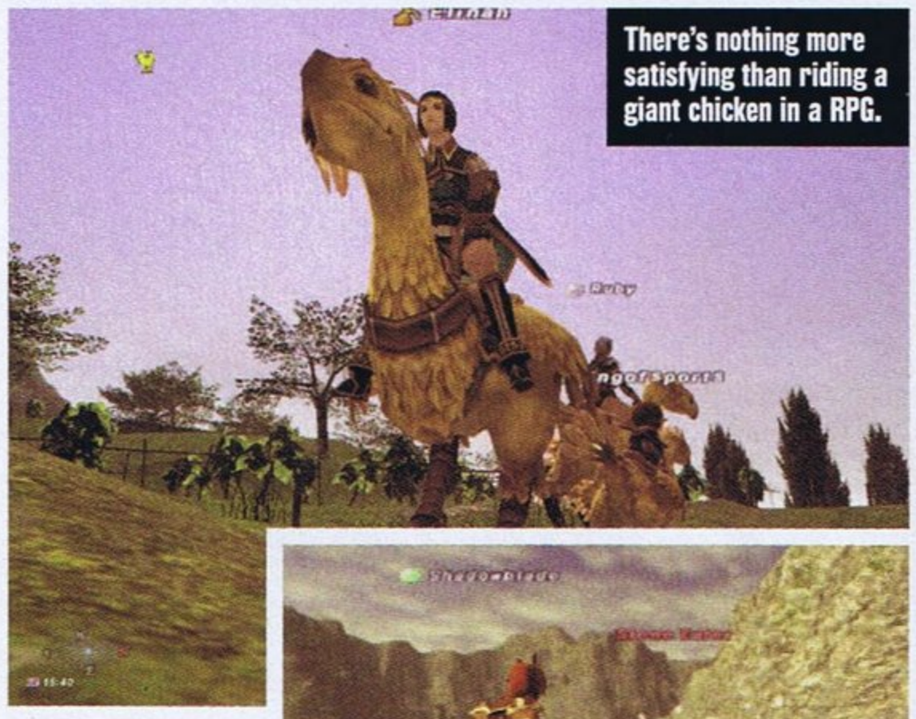
69%

GENRE: MMORPG

FINAL FANTASY XI

Import loveliness – it's hip to be Square.

There are loads of slots to equip various bits of armour.


There's nothing more satisfying than riding a giant chicken in a RPG.

This black dragon is part of the main storyline. There's simply no way of defeating it alone.

US AND THEM

At time of writing, *FFXI* is only available in the United States. An Australian release date is yet to be confirmed, so you'll need to import it. Be warned, though, the signing-up process to play online demands a valid American mail address – any valid U.S. address, as long as it has a zip code. It doesn't have to be your real address though. We even used Microsoft's address. It worked.

Fantastic

IT'S *Final Fantasy*, but not as we know it. The job system – as seen in the very first *FF* game – is back, there are Chocobos, Moogles, and Cid, but it's the most dramatic departure yet from a console series known for its reinvention.

Think *Final Fantasy*-flavoured *Everquest*, and you're on the right track. An entirely online RPG experience, massively multiplayer, where progress feels slow, and victories are hard won, but all the more satisfying for that. This is not a game for casual players by any stretch of the imagination. It will demand time, and plenty of it – all of it, in fact, if you're not careful.

After creating a character from one of five races (tedious all-rounder Hume, magical and impossibly cute Tarutaru, sturdy great Galka, swift feline Mithra or strong Elvaan), and six starting jobs (Warrior, Monk, Thief, White Mage, Black Mage, and Red Mage), you choose from one of three home nations and are thrust into a bustling world of staggering scope. A player-led economy ticks away in the Auction Houses every major city boasts, while the Beastmen hordes lurk in the wilderness beyond. There are dozens of quests given by NPC townsfolk, and missions that advance the plot, but are specifically related to your home nation. Just like *Everquest*, only better.

In a clever touch which immediately makes you feel like part of a wider world of derring do, your home nation's fortune and world standing fluctuates depending on the successes and failures of its roaming adventurers. Every time you kill a tough monster, your nation's grip over the area strengthens – every time you die, it weakens.

The only other penalty for dying is losing 10% of the experience needed for the next level up – no lost items, money, or anything else, just exp. Speaking of which, exp works in rather an odd way. It's possible to 'check' the wandering monsters, to gauge their threat rating, which is essentially a comparison of your level versus theirs. If you fight an even match on your own, you genuinely have about a 50/50 chance of surviving, but will bag a king's ransom in experience if you live to tell the tale. This holds true if you are a god-like level 70 Dark Knight, or humble first level Warrior.

There are a number of curious little features like that to swiftly become accustomed to. Rough patches in the user interface will still irk casual gamers, but this is hardly the game for those milksops anyway. Buy the game. Go fishing. Learn to cook. Kill goblins. Make friends. Possibly lose your job through endless unconvincing sick days. You'll thank us for it.

TOM MAYO

PCGA PROFILE

FFXI is:
- **Powerfully addictive**
- ***Everquest* with a twist**
- **Incredibly long term**

FFXI is not:
- **Available here (yet)**
- **For the unwary**
- **Particularly laggy**

■ Publisher **Square Enix** ■ Developer **Square Enix** ■ Minimum System **PIII 800MHz, 128Mb RAM, 32Mb 3D card, 6Gb HD space** ■ Recommended **P4, 256Mb RAM, 64Mb 3D card** ■ Multi-Player **Online only**
■ Web Address **www.playonline.com/ff11us/** ■ Release Date **Out now (US)**

PC GAMES addict
It sucks your life away, but in a lovely way. Detailed, vast, gripping, beautiful.
85%

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Everquest
The (ageing) daddy of the 3D MMORPG, now looking a little wobbly atop its throne.

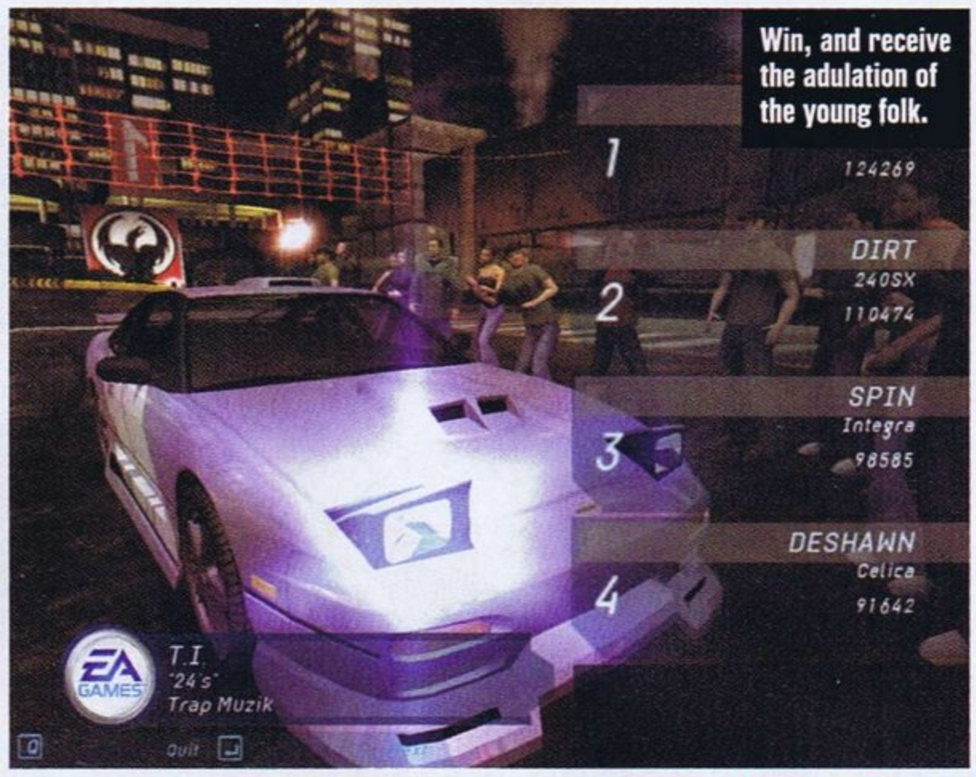
Star Wars Galaxies
Role-playing meatiness in that galaxy far, far away. Now with added Jedi.

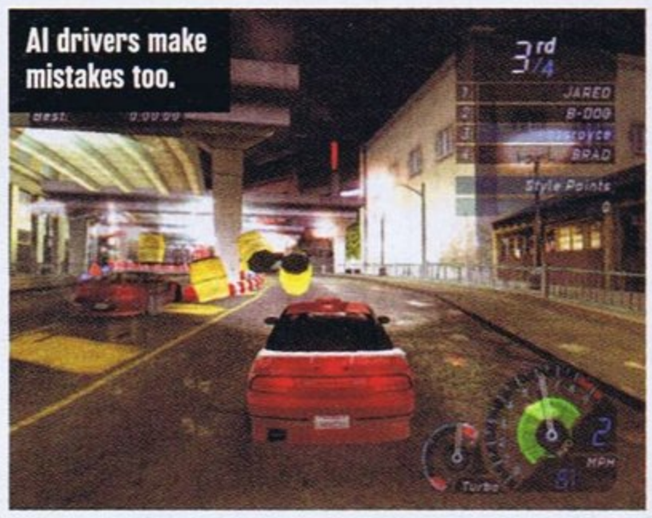
GENRE: RACING

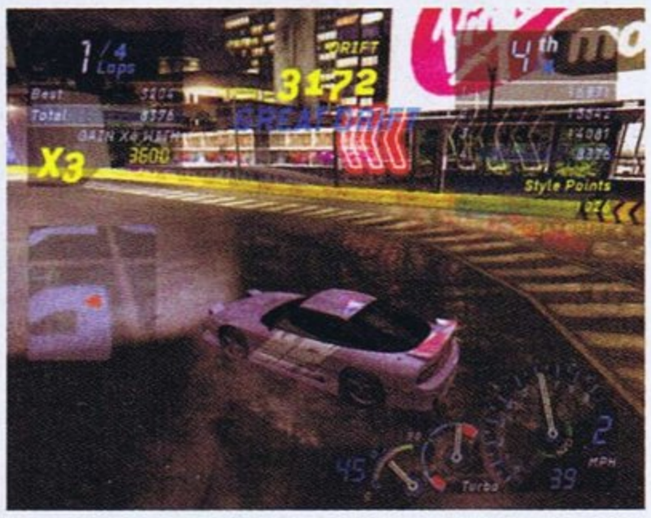
NEED FOR SPEED UNDERGROUND

As the tired miner said to his dealer.

Different parts of town are distinctively themed.







Tight

I was having a great time. I had scarcely moved all day from my semi-prostrate position before the union of beauty that is our new Alienware and *Need For Speed Underground*. Each freshly unlocked vinyl design, decal set or muffler tip raised a tiny zephyr of joy in my heart. "It's like an RPG," I caught myself thinking, "but with tinted windows and gloss paint!" I was game-drunk and, by late evening, I was heading home with a happy song in my head and fluffy thoughts for the eleventy-first in EA's ancient racing series.

Of course, when the other shoe eventually dropped, someone had done a jobby in it.

But for the most part, *Need For Speed: Underground* is a visually thrilling and eminently well-designed racer combining a convincing sensation of extreme speed and even a decent structure. The premise, in a break from the series' traditions, is that you race in illegal urban challenges in intricately souped-up cars, as opposed to haring about the Nevada desert in Lamborghinis being chased by coppers. Presentation is EA-slick and EA-smooth throughout: the idea is that you're a newcomer to the underground racing scene, with little cash and little prestige. A convincingly animated young lady encourages you to put together a flashy motor and challenge the other hot-rodders in a variety of race types.

Here's what I mean by the RPG reference: you start out with a frankly terrible motor, a bog-standard runaround chosen from an initial selection of half a dozen or so small models: MX5, Golf GTi, Civic – hardly head-turning muscle-cars. And the digital dame scornfully tells you as much, but as you progress more cars (and, more importantly, more modification options) become available. After a while you'll have a fast, well-handling motor capable of winning races and impressing the crowds inevitably drawn to the spectacle of young men facing death.

"It's like an RPG... but with tinted windows."

Two distinct lines of upgrade keep new, fresher carrots continually dangling just within arm's reach. Winning races unlocks performance parts, but winning them in style unlocks visual accoutrements: points are gained for each moment of air-time, slip-streaming and power-sliding, plus near-misses, use of short-cuts, clean laps and more. These style points are added to your running total whether you win the race or not, so even if you don't win every race at your first attempt you'll still be unlocking some obscure decal or bit of vinyl artwork every couple of outings. Adding these items to your car boosts its Reputation multiplier which in turn increases the number of style points you earn.

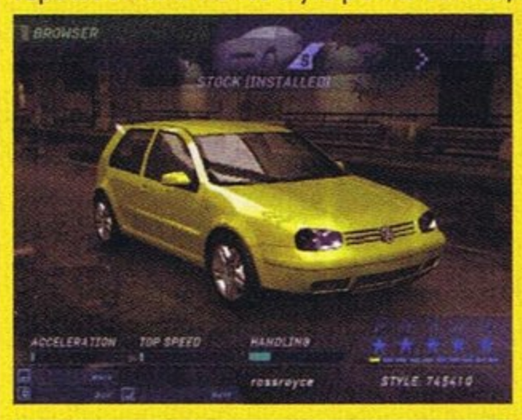
Underground's hook is that it starts you off slowly – literally. Your first ride is a car you might well be embarrassed to own in real life (for extra effect, I gave myself a lime-green Dodge Neon to begin with. Mmm), only very gradually attaining serious speed. And, true to real-world hot-rodders, Ferraris, Jags and Mercs don't enter the equation. It's a world where the badge on the grille isn't important, but the maker of your rims is. Factoring in the dozens of performance upgrades, cars, colours and hundreds of decal and vinyl artworks, there are millions

COVER ME

Someone at EA Black Box has clearly been given a prized Memo Authorizing Creativity. Winning specific races can result in more rewards than a new windscreen sticker; first, there are ongoing ranking tables for each race type which you can climb up by beating the incumbents. Second, and more interesting to our profession, you will occasionally be featured on performance car magazine covers from around the world, complete with dreadful photography, worse cover-lines and dodgy birds. They ought to take a leaf out of our book...

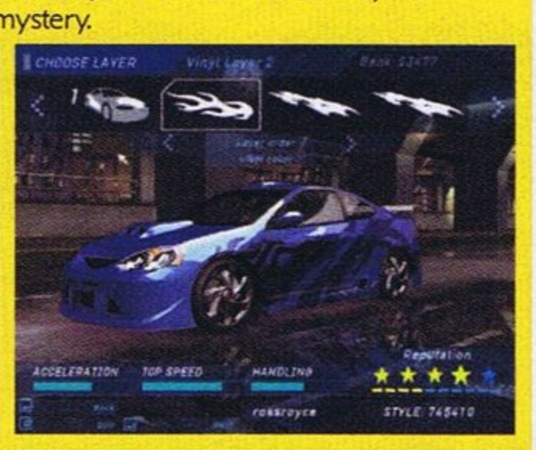
FOUR-WHEELED TASTE TRAVESTIES

I'm not known for my good taste, as proven by some of my aesthetic choices in *Underground*. A car with more extras – paintwork, body-kits, lighting, tinted windows, spoilers, alloys, decals (stickers to you and me) and more – increases your reputation and hence style points earned, but the judging panel itself is shrouded in mystery.

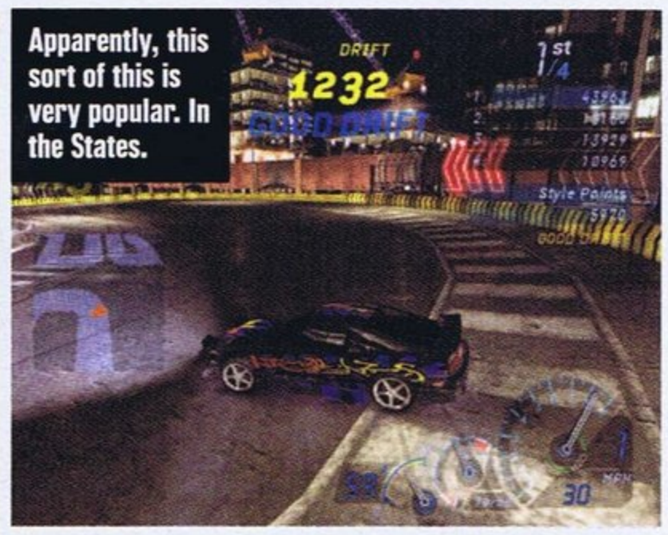


Mmm, a handsome yellow Golf GTi. This is sure to have the honeys interested.

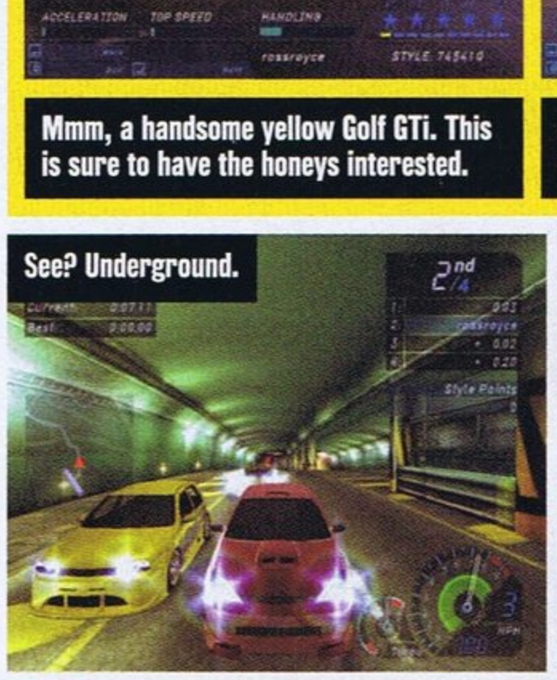
A few races on, a few bucks in my pocket and all sense of taste leaves me.



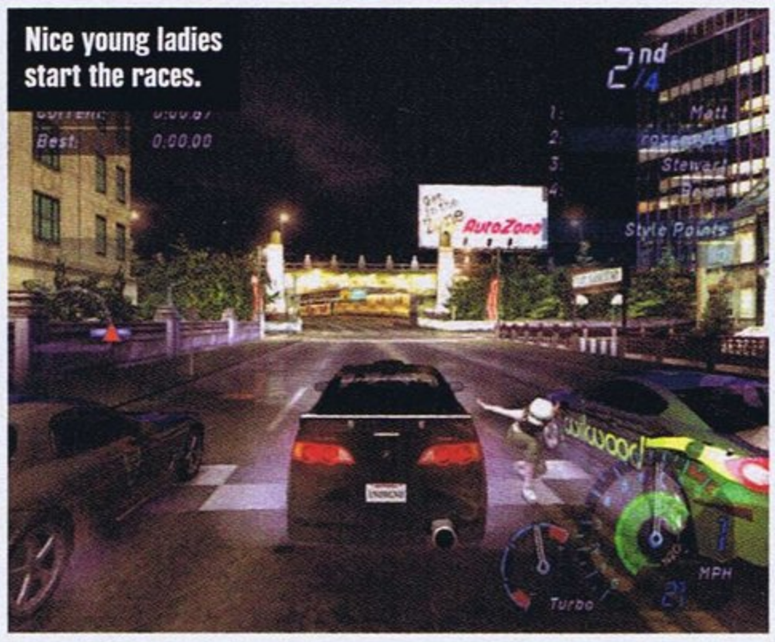
Trying to do something a bit subtle with vinyl layers but it just ain't working...



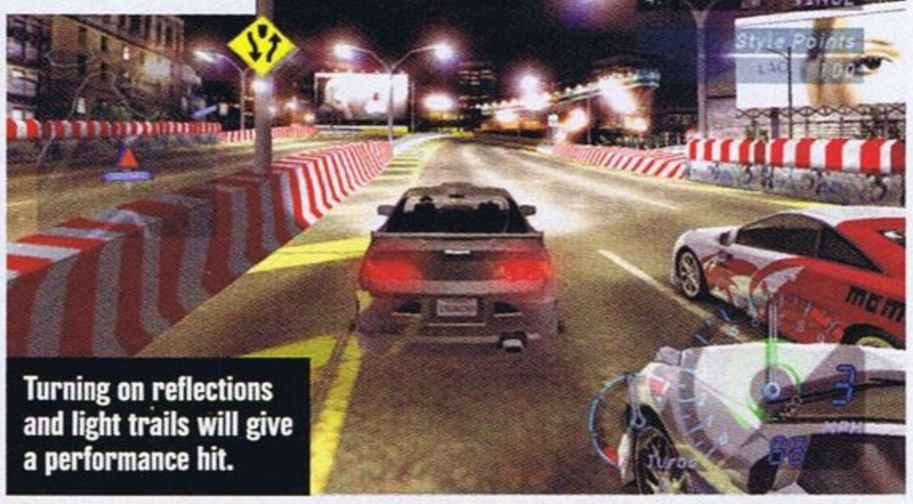
Apparently, this sort of this is very popular. In the States.



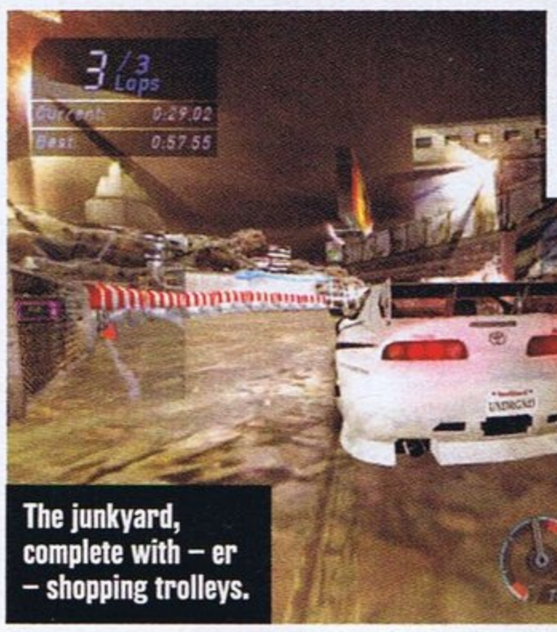
See? Underground.



Nice young ladies start the races.



Turning on reflections and light trails will give a performance hit.



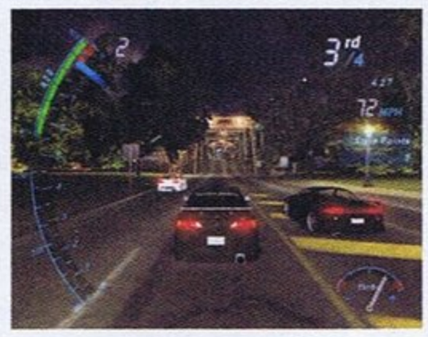
The junkyard, complete with – er – shopping trolleys.

SYSTEM MISER

How *NFS: Underground* will play on *your* PC

■ Supported resolutions: **640x480 to 1280x1024** ■ Scaleable options: **Reflections, shadows, headlights, geometry detail, more.**

VERDICT: **With so many options and a nice low resolution, you won't be surprised to hear that *NFSU* will run acceptably on a machine resembling the minimum spec – and, at a push, below it. However, that would do a truly stunning game a disservice: it deserves to be seen with at least moderate detail levels, or your enjoyment level may suffer.**



of unique cars to be made.

All of which is very nice, but *Underground* really scores points in the quality of its racing action. All the game's 111 events are set in a large, fictional city, sections of which are magically blocked off to facilitate the races. In the Go Underground career mode, you work your way methodically through these, but the surprisingly linear series of races never feels like a restricted trudge because the roster is an unpredictable mix of the various race types. Circuit is a self-explanatory blast of varying laps; Lap knockout is the same but the last-placed racer after each lap is eliminated. Drift is a recreation of the apparently-quite-popular US-based sport of simply skidding around a short, slippery course, in which points are scored for speed, angle and duration of skid. Drag is a straight-line race which requires manual gearbox dexterity of the highest order to gain and maintain the highest speed possible while drafting your opponents and avoiding obstacles (like other road users). This latter mode spices up the intense action with a blurring, shaking camera to reinforce the sense of extreme speed.

In all these modes, the AI drivers exhibit aggressive and often unpredictable behaviour, sometimes crashing out to hand victory on a plate, at other times deliberately side-swiping you out of contention. Though each event has a choice of three difficulty settings (opt for a harder one to win more cash), it's rare to be so stuck on a race that you'll get particularly frustrated – and a certain element of chance ensures you won't be stuck forever even if you're ham-fisted. Admittedly, *Underground* doesn't feature much that we haven't seen before, particularly in console titles like *Burnout* and *Project Gotham Racing*, but we can easily forgive that because they never came to PC.

Stand back people: here comes the other shoe.

On the second day, I skipped cheerily into the office with the intention of testing out the multi-player element of *Underground*. I quickly discovered the following. There is no split-screen, same-PC multi-player. There is no local area network play – not even head-to-head. There is no way to set up your own game for a friend to join over the net. In fact, the only way to play against other real people is to sign up to EA's own online service, agree to T&Cs, and join one of their servers.

A score that would have been grazing the 90s has been reduced because of these incomprehensible multiplayer restrictions. What a waste.

ROSS ATHERTON

PCGA PROFILE

Underground is:
- **Dark**
- **Shiny**
- **Bloody good fun**

Underground is not:
- **LAN nor split-screen**
- **Too hard**
- **Exactly freeform**

■ Publisher **Electronic Arts** ■ Developer **EA Black Box** ■ Minimum System **P4 1GHz, 256Mb RAM, 64Mb 3D card** ■ Recommended **P4 1.6GHz, 512Mb RAM, 128Mb 3D card** ■ Multi-Player **Online only (via EA and AOL only), up to four** ■ Web Address **www.needforspeed.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

NFS: Hot Pursuit II
Solid, badge-packed, traditional *NFS* fare, now available at knockdown prices. Maybe.

Midnight Club II
Well-structured illegal street racer that's somewhat spoiled by a poor conversion.

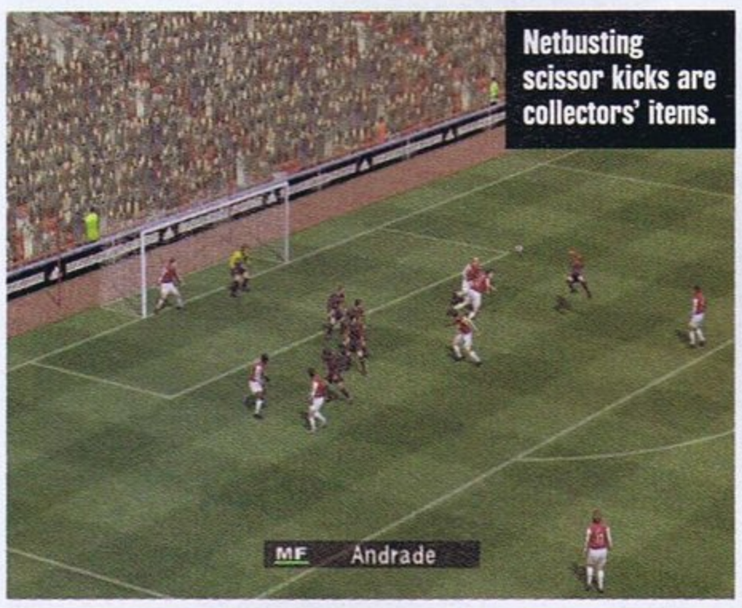
PC GAMES addict
A beautiful, truly great racer that has been pointlessly mutilated. Why do such things?

83%

GENRE: SPORTS

PRO EVOLUTION SOCCER 3

Yes, there were years of hurt. Yes, there was dreaming. But we always knew football would come home eventually.



Netbusting scissor kicks are collectors' items.

Goooaallllll!

One hand or two? The modesty among the defensive wall is admirable.

CLUB SHOP

God bless the training mode. Not only is it a way of perfecting that triple feint that will have the AI's keeper floundering, it also hands you some pretty compelling mini-games that unlock a dutch of easter eggs to add to your game. Earn a few *PES* points on the training ground and you can nip into the *PES* shop to purchase some new player haircuts, new stadiums and classic players such as Best and Maradona. Nice.

IT'S often claimed by players that scoring a goal is better than sex. Sadly, Mother Nature denied me the looks or the soccer skills to test this theory as exhaustively as the subject demands. I do know that when my goal-scoring cherry on the PC version of *Pro Evolution Soccer* finally popped, the afterglow radiated through the PC Games Addict office like a stoked furnace. The wait, it seemed, had only made the moment sweeter.

And lord knows we've all been waiting. For a long time PC gamers have had to knowingly settle for second best, or be forced down a path of console treachery in order to experience the beautiful game at its most beautiful. If, like me, you reluctantly gave in to your urges, you now have a rather noisy DVD player, because we have here the perfect *PES3* port – complete with a high-res graphical skin that wallops the console version into row Z. No fuss. No bother. This is the very best football game on the very best gaming platform.

Qualifying such statements isn't easy. *Pro Evo* games are a magic formula of subtlety and finesse that are carefully tweaked with each new version. There are no gimmicks, no unique features, just a combination of perfectly tuned elements that recreate the essentials of soccer – passing, tackling, shooting – with unparalleled grace and realism.

If there is a secret, it's that *PES3* gets the basics right. Sure, you can execute the most flamboyant of acrobatic moves – scissor kicks, flying headers, rasping volleys – but often these balletic moves will end in tears, troubling only the ballboys while your player is left to untangle himself from the wreckage of a crowded goalmouth. Like the real thing, there are a series of fundamentals

"The play is as fluid as a George Best luncheon."

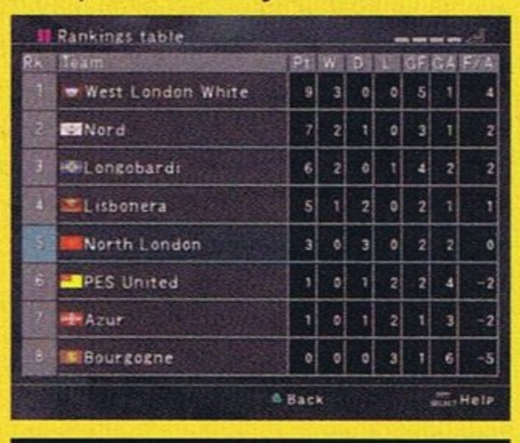
that govern the success of every move you make. Time and space away from defenders, ball trajectory and velocity play a major role in determining whether that shot will find the net, that pass its intended target, and whether you'll beat the fullback. When you exploit these factors to your advantage *Pro Evo* enables you to run around the room Ravenelli-style, basking in your own footballing genius. More often than not, however, your head won't be up your shirt but buried in your hands as you curse your ineptness. In both cases the action was the same – a simple button press. It is *Pro Evo*'s incredibly accurate reflection of soccer's essentials that makes the agony and ecstacy possible. But crucially, it's your skill on the ball that determines whether you revel in your successes or wallow in your failure.

When you work out the subtleties, it doesn't feel like you're exploiting the mechanics of the game because they all reflect the sport so accurately. Get the ball on a player's favoured foot and he's more likely to score, get time and space on the ball and his pass will find its man. Get goal side and your opponent can't get his shot in – all basic principles of the sport, all flawlessly brought to life. On top of this, there's an extensive array of player attributes that create unique individuals within your team, each with their respective strengths and weaknesses. And, as in the real game, success relies on getting the right player in the right situation. It's the appreciation of these subtleties that swell the feeling of accomplishment when you finally breach a defence, driving you on to throw one more dummy, play another one-two, to carve out a killer goal next time and to just keep on

MASTER AND SERVANT

This single-player challenge has been a mainstay of the console version, a proven time thief with no regard for body clocks, social lives and occupations. It's what the phrase 'just one more game' was invented for. You will obey.

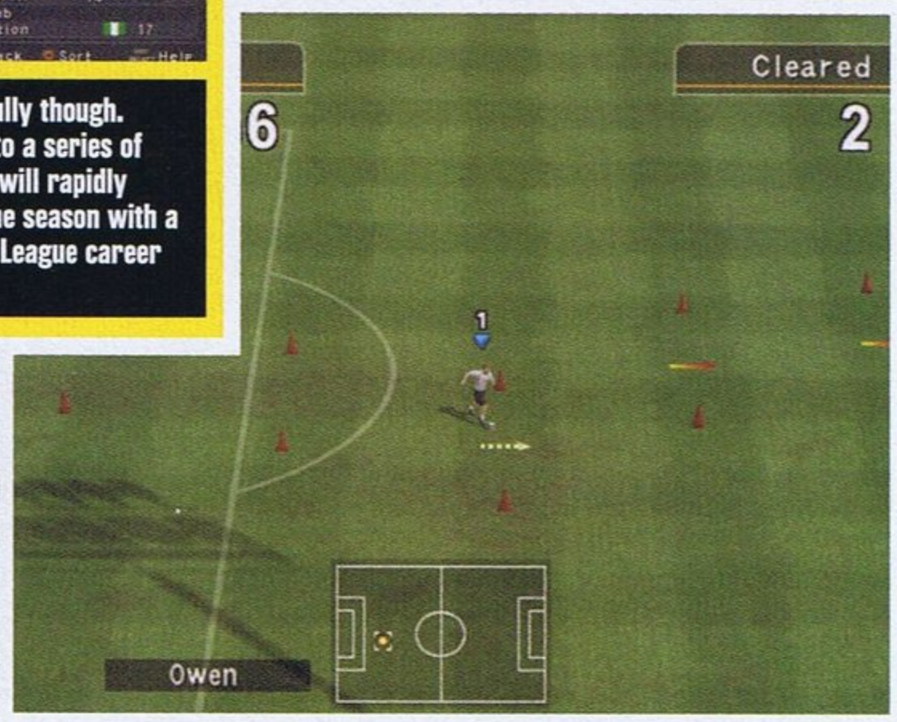
You begin by taking control of a basement club. Your aim: to play through the season and snatch promotion and cup glory along the way. With a squad full of no-hopers it ain't going to be easy.


Rankings table
Rk Team Pt W D L GF GA F/A
1 West London White 9 3 0 0 5 1 4
2 Nord 7 2 1 0 3 1 2
3 Longobardi 6 2 0 1 4 2 2
4 Lisbonera 5 1 2 0 2 1 1
5 North London 3 0 3 0 2 2 0
6 PES United 1 0 1 2 2 4 -2
7 Azur 1 0 1 2 1 3 -2
8 Bourgogne 0 0 0 3 1 6 -5
Back
Help

Results mean transfer points. These can be used when you enter transfer negotiations that will hopefully bring in new starlets. Start scraping victories and you can bring in some quality players to bolster the side.

Do manage things carefully though. Overspend and spiral into a series of defeats and your points will rapidly drop into the red. End the season with a deficit and your Master League career will end abruptly.

Goalmouth scrambles will have you bashing the gamepad.



Young Michael Owen worries the Argies.

Rehearse your set-pieces on the training ground.

Brazliant

playing until RSI sets in.

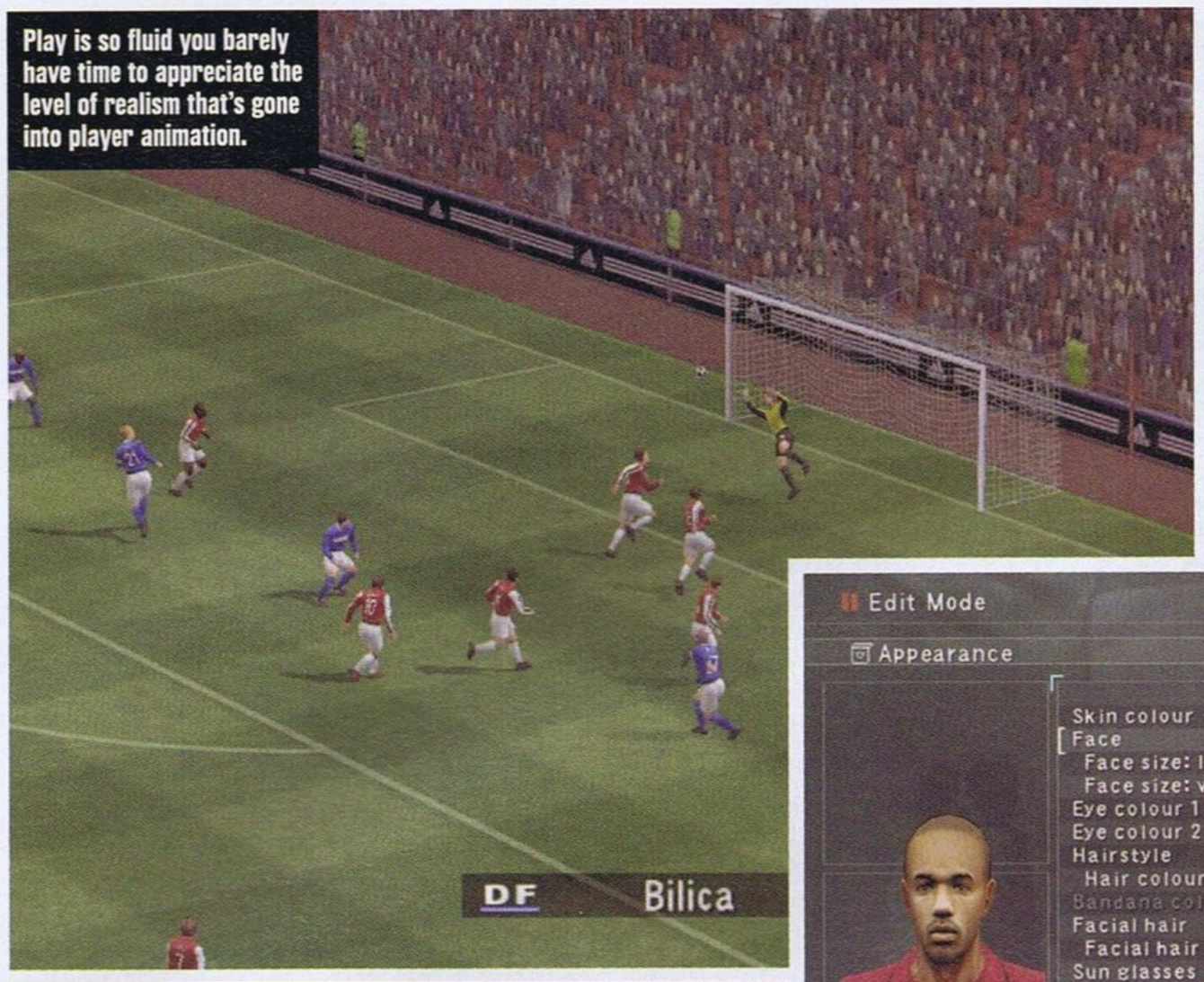
Flawless animation and staggering ball physics help to maintain the realism. The play is fast-paced and as fluid as a George Best luncheon and yet each of the many, many animations is so meticulously detailed – from full stretch passes and last ditch tackles to soaring aerial challenges – that nothing looks formulaic or repetitive. It's all seamlessly sewn together, and combined with a ball which behaves exactly as it should: a separate entity demanding respect, skill and craft to control. It bobbles, runs loose, and gets mis-controlled, creating hectic goal-mouth scrambles and near misses that provide bigger thrills and wider smiles than any long-range smash *FIFA* serves up. This is fluent stuff with all the random brilliance of real soccer. *FIFA* edged closer this year, but *Pro Evo* doesn't make you walk a precarious tightrope of complicated moves. Lose the ball and you can counter quickly and easily. There's a midfield battle but it's not the war of attrition we witnessed with EA's game. Crucially, through all the subtle skill moves and the vast array of control options, *Pro Evo* proves immediately accessible but furiously difficult to master.

The merciless AI opponent also guarantees a long lifespan. The default skill level will prove your match, the two levels beyond it will dish out regular thrashings. The AI is skilled, patient in its build-up, and ruthless in the finish, but completely fallible at the same time. The excellent training mode will prepare you for the challenge, providing some nifty mini-games in the process, but it's in the Master League (see Master and Servant) that your real progress can be measured.

It's here that *Pro Evo*'s major flaw is exposed. The lack of official approval is glaringly obvious from the start, with players and club teams handed bizarre names (Trad Bricks for Manchester United, anyone?). The regional structure of the Master League format maintains the confusion and the general lack of official cup competitions is disappointing. A full editor at least hands you the tools to put things right, and third party updates will doubtless do the job for you. Whether they'll rescue the dreadfully dull commentary double act of Brackley and Brooking is another matter. Brackley's monotonous mantra of shirt numbers when commentating on unlicensed continued over

GOING TACTICAL

You may have full control out on the pitch but games can be won and lost before a ball is kicked. Getting to grips with *PES3*'s in-depth tactical options is key to getting results. The usual array of formations are coupled with tools to decide player and team strategies which can all be controlled in-game. There's also tools that allow the AI to select you the optimum team line-up.



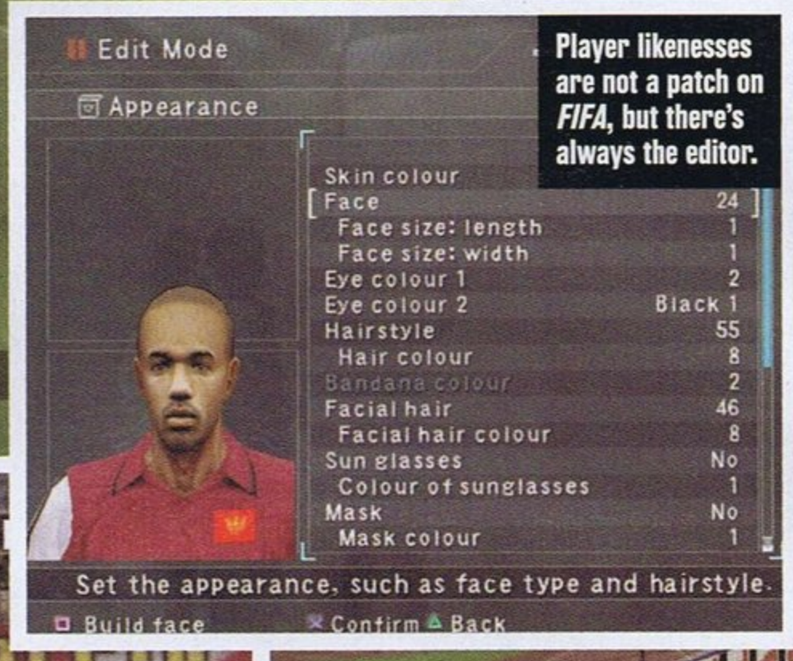
Play is so fluid you barely have time to appreciate the level of realism that's gone into player animation.

SYSTEM MISER

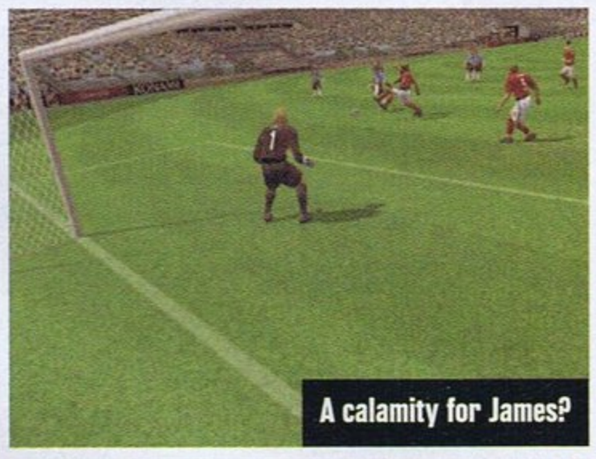
How *Pro Evolution Soccer 3* will play on *your* PC

- Supported resolutions: **640x480, 800x600, 1024x768, 1152x864, 1280x960, 1280x1024**
- Scaleable options: **Graphics quality – high, medium and low**

VERDICT: For a console port *PES3* has a pretty hefty minimum spec. On something like a PIII 800 you may need to reduce the resolution and tweak the graphics quality in order to keep matches flowing smoothly. On the recommended system, with a powerful ATI or nVidia card under the hood, you'll be able to enjoy *PES3* at the highest resolution and graphics settings.

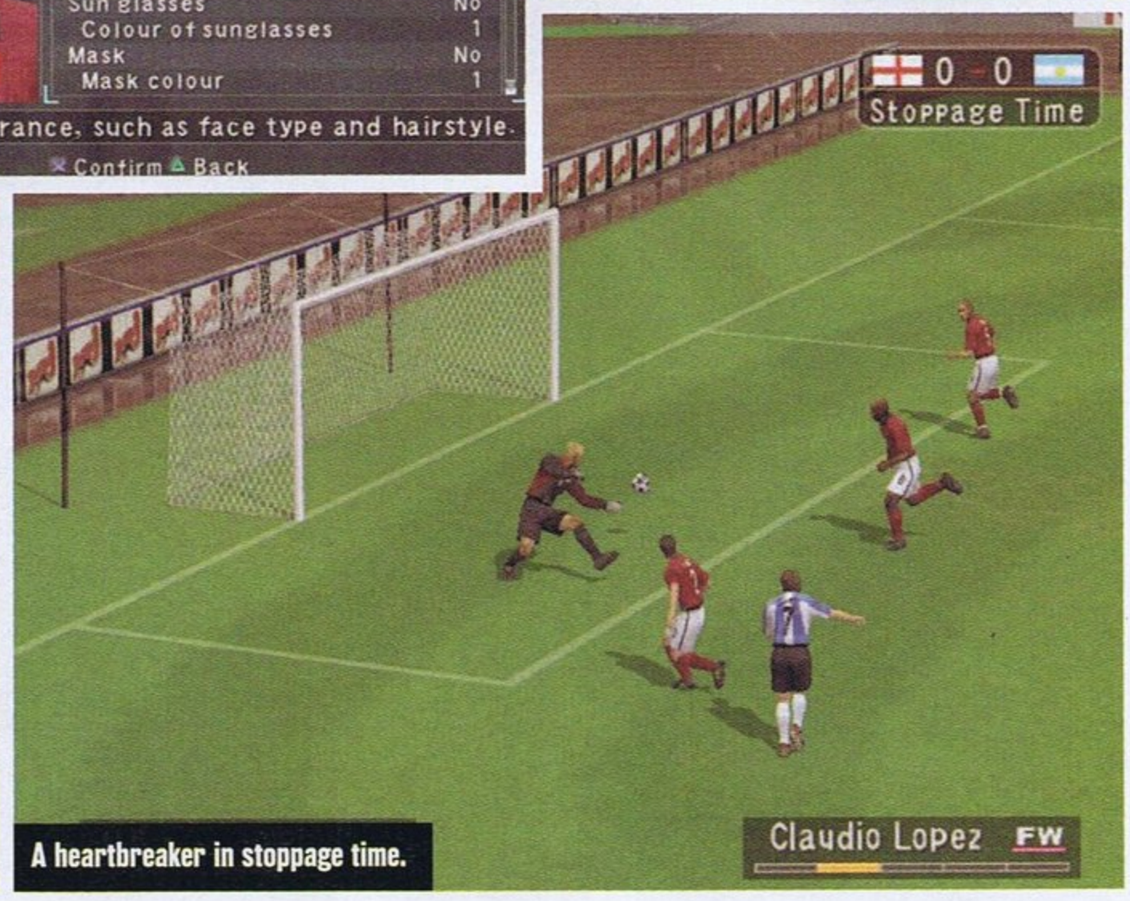


Player likenesses are not a patch on *FIFA*, but there's always the editor.



A calamity for James?

The advantage rule keeps the game flowing, although the referees are far from consistent.



A heartbreaker in stoppage time.

PCGA PROFILE

Pro Evo 3 is:
- **The best football game ever**
- **The best sports game ever**
- **Worth the wait, then**

Pro Evo 3 is not:
- **Totally PC friendly**
- **Online enabled**
- **Good news for EA**

teams is like listening to the man ordering a Chinese meal for 22 people. Thankfully Konami have at least been thoughtful enough to allow you to scale the commentary to a minimum.

Shame they weren't considerate enough to address the dreadful console interface, complete with the wretchedly-shaped button symbols you're forced to continually translate in order to navigate. It seems Konami conveniently forgot that we've access to mouse and keyboard for such matters. Glitches like this, along with the lack of a LAN or online multi-player option, deny *PES3* truely legendary status.

With *FIFA 2004* released only recently, the comparison is inevitable and it's significant that EA's latest game plays on *Pro Evo*'s frailties, however few. Presentation and online play are the major areas, but *FIFA*'s 'Off the Ball' features were doubtless prompted by *Pro Evo*'s only real drawback

"Pro Evo 3 signals the end of FIFA's reign..."

in terms of control: inconsistent off-the-ball AI that renders the through-ball a flaccid weapon. There will be times when you'll crave the kind of control that *FIFA* includes, fullbacks holding back with space available and strikers stalling runs when opportunities open up. The deep tactical options (see Going Tactical) offer a workaround but the default AI setup is clearly lacking in this area.

Sadly for EA, tactical nous is not enough. *PES3*'s arrival on the PC not only puts a stop to our pathetic yearning, it also signals the end of *FIFA*'s reign as the platform's definitive football game. True enough, Kings of Leon aren't on the soundtrack, 'Lloyd' is the Sky Blue side of Manchester and the box talent consists of a goggle-eyed celebrity ref. But cut through the bull and get to the part that counts. *PES3* simply plays *FIFA* off the park. It's the purist's game alright. Pure soccer. Pure genius.

MARK SUTHERNS

■ Publisher **Konami** ■ Developer **KCET** ■ Minimum System **PIII 800, 128Mb Ram, 32Mb 3D card** ■ Recommended **P4 1.5GHz, 256Mb RAM, 64Mb 3D card** ■ Multi-Player **1-8 players**
■ Web Address **www.konami-europe.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

FIFA 2004
Another impeccably polished *FIFA*. A more methodical game, without the X factor.

ISS3
Technically inferior arcade effort from Konami's other team of footy developers.

PC GAMES addict
The finest moment in footy gaming and one of the greatest PC titles around.

91%

IS THERE LIFE AFTER DEATH?

AFRAID SO.

Don't believe in the afterlife? Neither did Officer Lazarus Jones, right up until it tapped him on the shoulder. This hard-headed Detroit cop has been drawn into the haunting horror grounds of the undead - and now, he's not just fighting disbelief, he's fighting monsters, mutants and ghouls. Prepare yourself and take a leap over to the other side.

www.ghosthunter-game.com au.playstation.com

PlayStation 2

IF YOU CAN'T BEAT THEM,
YOU'RE JOINING THEM.

"PlayStation" are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. and "SONY" are registered trademarks of Sony Corporation. GhostHunter™. © 2003. Published by Sony Computer Entertainment Europe. Developed by Cambridge Studios. GhostHunter is a trademark of Sony Computer Entertainment Europe. WLTBWA KSR56673

GENRE: ADVENTURE

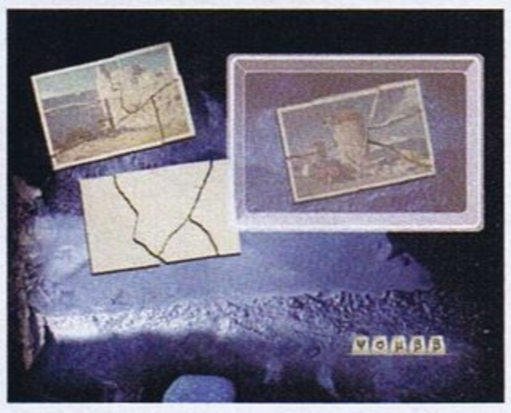
IN MEMORIAM

A well written, excellently produced, dark, intriguing and original French adventure game... What the hell?

All good scary stories have to have a doll with no eyes. It's the law.

Recognise this building? Then you've already solved a puzzle. Gosh, you're good.

If you're thinking, "that's murky and confusing," you've just made the developers' day.



ASHES TO ASHES

While there are too many weak puzzles, some are so fine that the thrill of solving is awesome. You know that *your* ingenuity made that leap, initiated that search, and put those two ideas together. And you'll be rewarded by the sinister blackening puzzle screen, perhaps more film footage, and certainly another blood-curdling message from The Phoenix.

PCGA PROFILE

In Memoriam is:
- Totally original
- Life infiltrating
- Bigger than a puzzle game

In Memoriam is not:
- Perfect, by any means
- Quite difficult enough
- Family entertainment

YOU'LL have to bear with me – I've not quite finished the game yet. Well, in a way I have, but strange as this sounds, the game hasn't quite finished with me.

The slightly tenuous opening sets up the idea that the police have failed to crack a CD-ROM of puzzles sent by a serial killer, and so have opened it up to the public. The killer has recently taken two people hostage, and his disc will ultimately help you find out why. Forgive this, and you're away.

In Memoriam starts poorly. But it picks up quickly, and it's easily worth playing through the dodgy opening. What soon unfurls is an extraordinarily complicated plot, elaborately woven through thousands of years of history. Ancient myths, facts, and theories mix with contemporary circumstances and a gruesome series of murders. What's more, you're being led through it all by the murderer himself.

Here's the *massive* hook. A puzzle may offer some clues – a name, a location – at which point you *switch out of the game*, open your web browser, stick the info into your favourite search engine, and explore. If you've ever come across the Internet puzzle game, *The Stone*, then you'll have some idea of how this works. But strikingly differently, in among the results you not only find sites containing the genuine information the story is based upon, but also a remarkable number of faked sites the developers have built and scattered across the Internet.

Search for the name of one of the victims and you'll find her blog. And a news story about her on a university student information page. And a public forum discussing the murder. And none of them

"Co-players help you out, and they aren't real."

are genuine. There are fake companies, sailing regatta results pages, CVs and scout troops. Try it. Search for 'skl network' today.

This is nothing compared to the shock you get when emails start turning up on your regular account. You end up with co-players helping you out, and they aren't real. Halfway through, I wouldn't have been at all phased if someone had pushed a clue through my letterbox.

The depth of care, the sleek design, and the deeply threatening and disconcerting messages from the killer, makes this gripping. The fact that the developers spent two years filming the video footage, built dozens of fake websites, created fictional characters that emailed me (and still are), and taught me so much I never knew before, makes this exceptional.

Some puzzles are frustratingly weak, and some acting is scratchy, but forgive or ignore that – this is a truly original game. Having finished it, I'm still unsure of what was fact, and what was fiction. I don't know where the lines were. And part of me still believes in that serial killer. I urge you to try this, purely because you'll not have played anything else like it.

JOHN WALKER

■ Publisher **Ubi Soft** ■ Developer **Lexis Numerique** ■ Minimum System **PII 333, 700Mb HD, 64Mb RAM, 16Mb graphics card, 56k internet connection** ■ Recommended **Broadband** ■ Multi-Player **Not with real people** ■ Web Address **www.inmemoriam-thegame.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Uplink
Hack and stash your way across the internet, but this time it's all pretend.

The Stone
Absolutely incredible web-based puzzle game. www.thestone.com.

PC GAMES addict

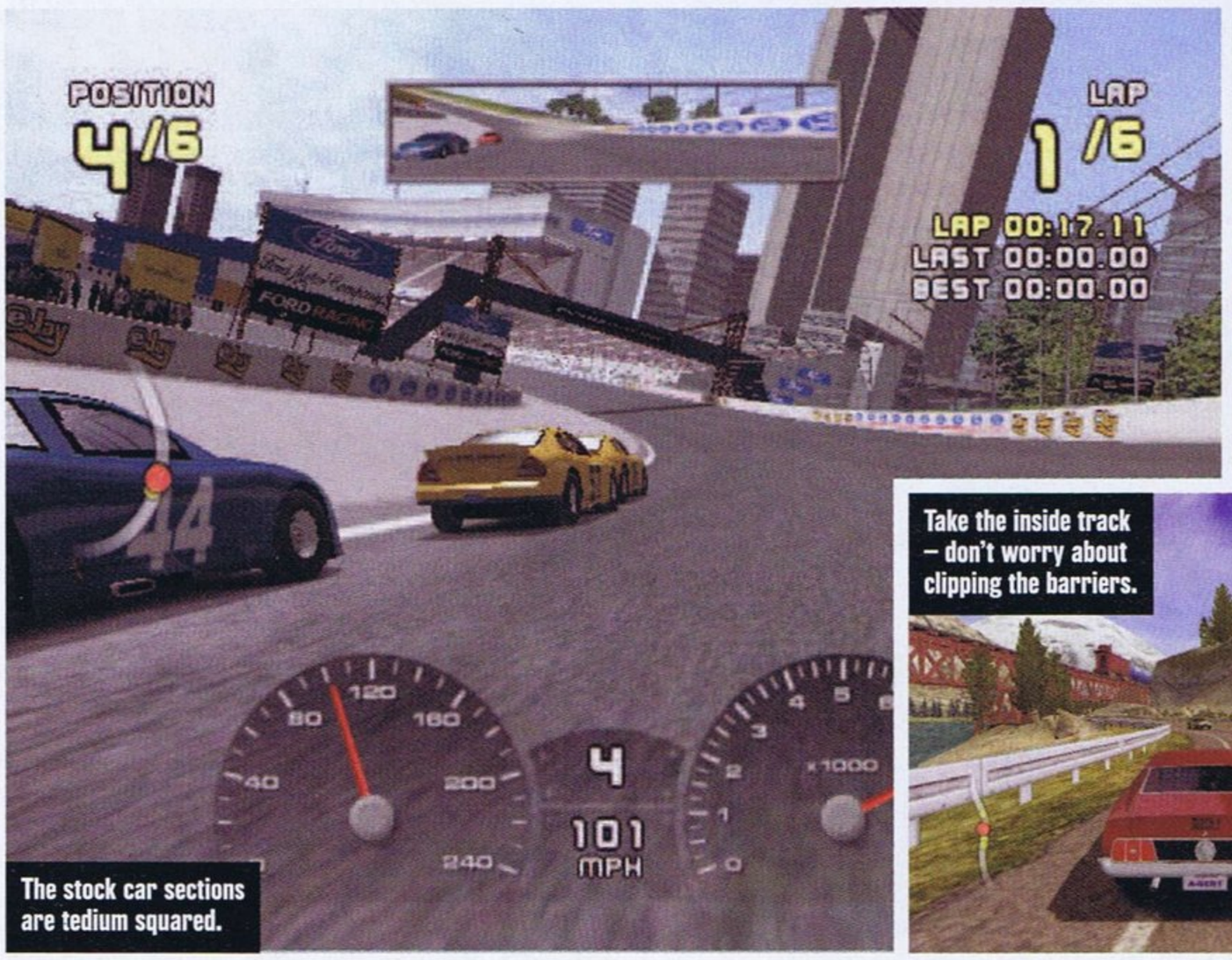
A new idea, executed with macabre finesse. A fantastic surprise.

81%

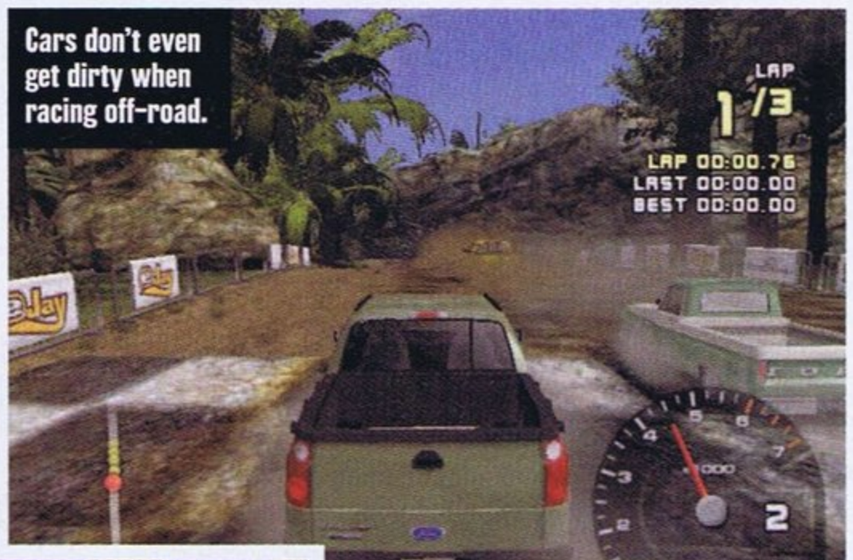
GENRE: RACING

FORD RACING 2

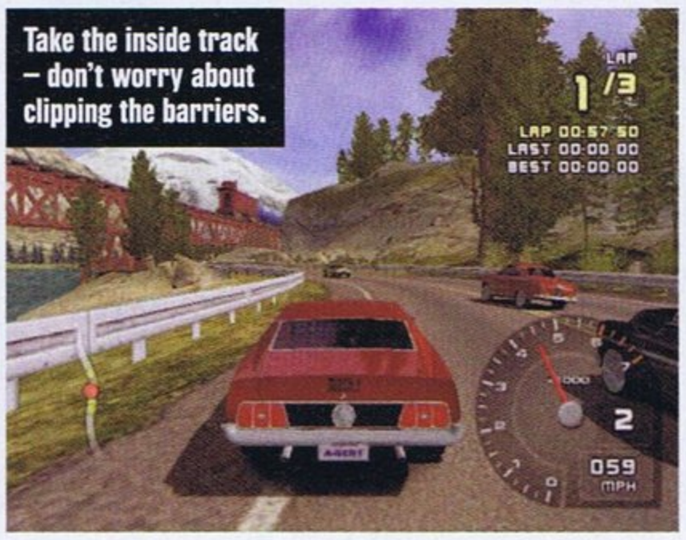
As opposed to fjord racing, a competitive sport among geographers.



The stock car sections are tedium squared.



Cars don't even get dirty when racing off-road.



Take the inside track – don't worry about clipping the barriers.

Exhausted

THE KA'S THE STAR

Razorworks have missed a trick by not making any of today's production models available to race. Just imagine the fun you could have, driving battered Escorts off bridges, rolling Kas down muddy hills, and driving Mondeos over mounds of dirt and ash. Instead, it's all classic and concept models, just the cars we lust over, and never own.

IS persistence an admirable quality? Despite the critical mauling given by some to the first *Ford Racing*, Empire have bounced back with yet another dog-tired racing game. It's like a particularly eager puppy, jumping at your leg, desperate for attention. Consider this review the equivalent of a candlestick violently striking its head.

Handling is still the major problem. We're supposed to be driving genuine production line models, but they feel like they've been assembled in a lawnmower factory rather than Ford's high-precision facility. The cars slip, skeet-like, across the racing line. They feel like soaped-up bathtubs, not souped-up Mustangs.

Rather than offering a straight series of races, *Ford Racing* splits its goals and rewards into distinct categories, based around the company's heritage. So there are special races based around Ford at the movies, challenges involving concept cars and driving their 'living legends'. But these categories sound rather more exotic than they actually are. In reality they contain arbitrary challenges. In the movie races you have to drive while sticking rigidly to a racing line – deviation results in a time penalty and an inevitable repeat performance. It's hardly gripping cinematic stuff – just another tedious jaunt through the countryside.

Which takes us out of the factory, and

"Like soaped up bathtubs, not souped-up Mustangs."

into the fire. Little imagination is displayed in the design of the tracks. We've grown out of racing through themed, naive environments, balloons and hang-gliders buzzing the road while you drift through the corners. These fantasy courses feel empty, dreary and unimaginative, compared to *Need for Speed*'s busy city intersections and neon billboards.

Just how dull does it get? Here's the worst example. There are a series of stock-car races, set around a perfect urban oval. Each lap takes around 45 seconds, and there are six laps. You'll spend your five minutes staring at back bumpers, tapping the left key and watching the road, keeping as close to the edge of the track as you can be bothered. It's tedium incarnate – as if the designers had actually sat down and worked out how they might best bore you beforehand.

The only highlight lies in the off-road racing, where you take SUVs, open-top trucks and rally cars out into the mud. The handling physics make some kind of sense here, as you end up drifting around corners, perpendicular to the direction of travel. The presence of a few jumps spices things up a bit as well: launching a glorified people carrier 60 feet into the air, and landing with a thump is a fine way to spend a couple of minutes.

But then you notice that your SUV is keeping pace with the Ford Focus rally car, and, bang, there goes that suspension of disbelief. Period of novelty over. Can we put *Ford Racing* to sleep now?

TIM EDWARDS

PCGA PROFILE

Ford Racing 2 is:
- Low mileage
- Tired
- Dull

Ford Racing 2 is not:
- Exciting
- A good runner
- A bargain at half the price

■ Publisher **Empire** ■ Developer **Razorworks** ■ Minimum System **PIII 500, 128Mb RAM, 32Mb 3D card, 150Mb HD space** ■ Recommended **PIII 800, 256 RAM, 64Mb 3D card** ■ Multi-Player **Two on one PC**
■ Web Address **www.fordracing2.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Colin McRae Rally 3
Specialised dirt track racing. Not the best *McRae* game, but the most advanced.

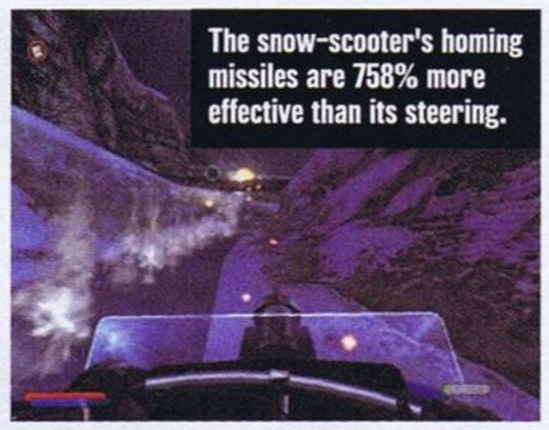
Midnight Club 2
Open-ended urban competition. ABS and Ultra-stylish soundtrack included.

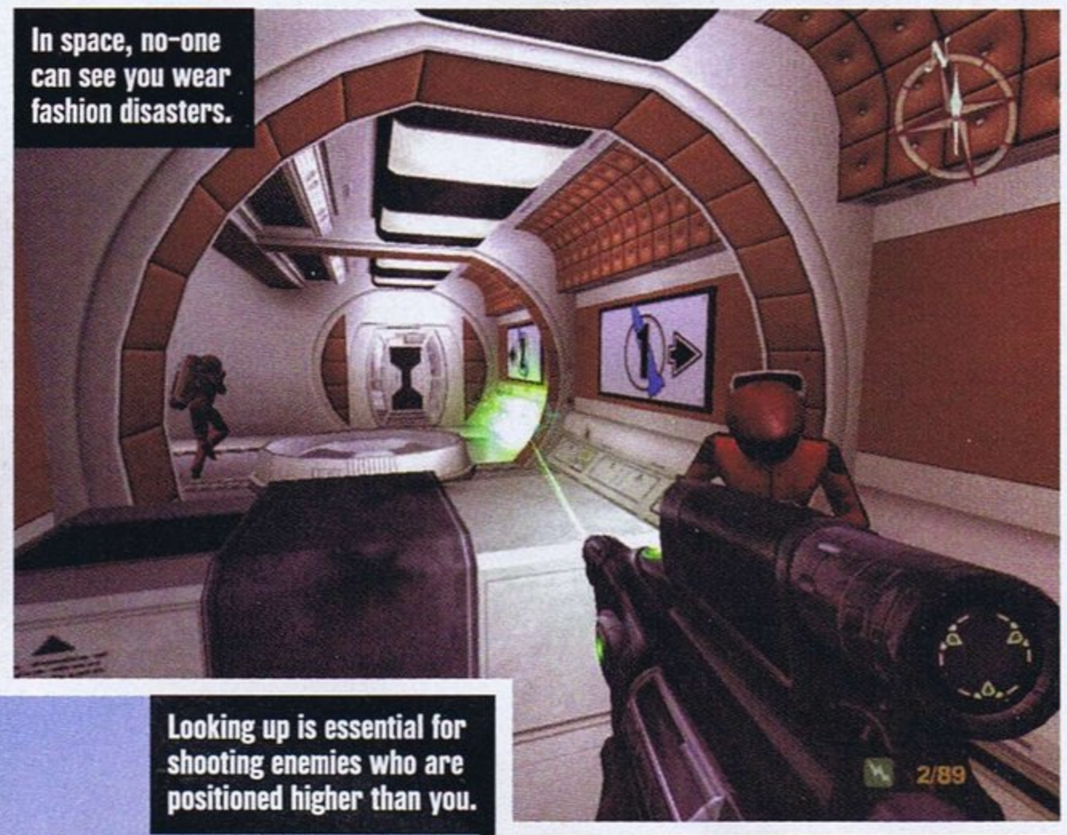
PC GAMES addict
If the Model T handled this badly, Henry Ford would have been bankrupt in a year.
49%

GENRE: FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER

CONTRACT J.A.C.K.

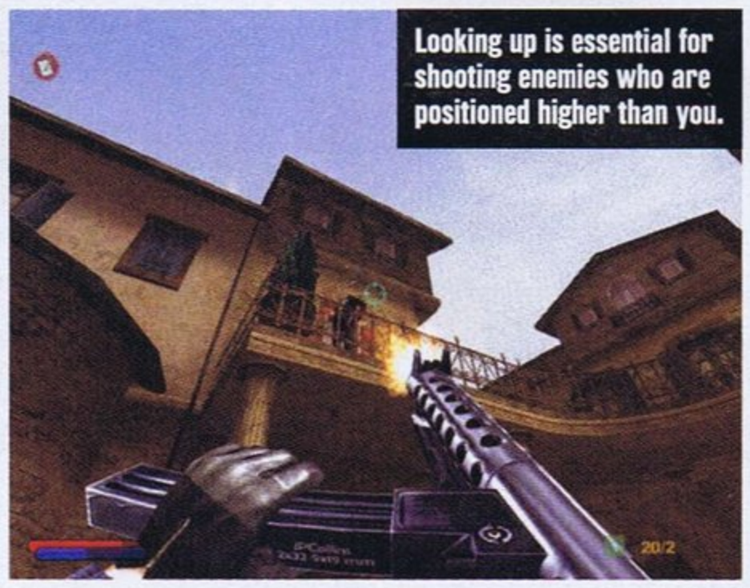
You're more likely to find us playing Contract Bridge.


The snow-scooter's homing missiles are 758% more effective than its steering.

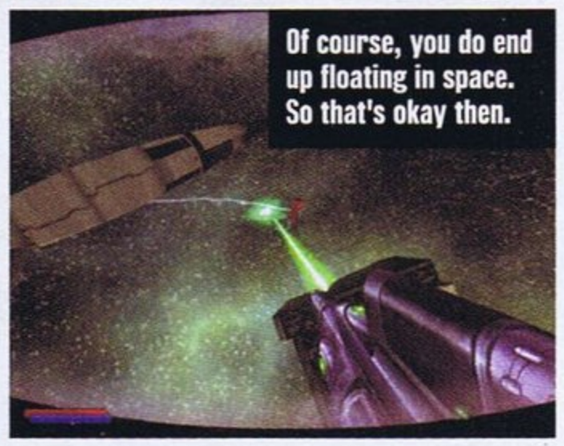


In space, no-one can see you wear fashion disasters.

Contract J.A.C.K. features some of the most enthusiastic bloodstains of recent years.



Looking up is essential for shooting enemies who are positioned higher than you.


Of course, you do end up floating in space. So that's okay then.

GETTING MEDIEVAL

Mein Gott! They let one through. In a genuinely amusing puzzle section, you have to set the power at such a level to cause enough pain to make the agent speak without blowing the circuitry. It sticks out from the majority of the game like a severed thumb nailed into the front of your television set.

YOU lean back from your computer, cross your arms and think: "What mark is that worth?". Logically enough, you compare it to the competition. As a linear shooter, the top of the current class is the pummelling *Call of Duty*, and it's nowhere near as good as that. So you start working downwards. You completed the petite but perfectly formed *Max Payne 2* earlier in the afternoon. Still worse. You work down the list, with increasing desperation. Hmm... you enjoyed *Unreal II* more than this, and you liked that less than anyone else. Hell – you even enjoyed *Nightfire* more than this. And then you hit *Devastation*, which is definitely worse that what you just experienced. Then you remember that you would have given *Devastation* a score somewhere in the twenties.

Oh dear.

This means one thing: after years of effort, Monolith have gone and blown their critical reputation in a single misjudged decision. This is so utterly deficient in the charm and effort that personified their string of great games (*AvP2*, *Tron 2.0*, both *No One Lives Forever* games) that I ended up checking the credits listing to see if it was even made by the same people. Sadly, it is. Guys? What happened? Drunk in the office for eight months again? Don't worry. We've all been there.

You can see the thinking behind the design decisions, but it still stinks of desperation. Both *NOLF* games were genuinely witty and imaginative, both earning coveted scores of over 85%. However, they simply didn't sell. Rethink time, thinks they. Perhaps they're being *too* clever-clever. Strip out the stealth elements and the more odd-ball sections to leave the basic shooting action to appeal to the proles. Oh yeah – and lose delectable female lead Cate Archer as FPS fans don't like having their masculinity threatened for even a second by playing a female role.

"What happened? Drunk in the office again?"

In many ways, they've succeeded in their aims, so they should deserve a slap on the back. However, reading between the lines, it seems their aim was to remove any interesting elements from *No One Lives Forever* to make it more saleable. It won't work. If *NOLF* didn't sell because it was too unique, then this will be damned for being all too normal. And rubbish, of course.

The problem is that they've gone too far, and, simultaneously, not far enough. As *Call of Duty* and *Halo* show, if you're going to base your entire game on shooting, you have to think in depth about level flow, altering challenge and experience and so on. This does none of that. Equally, they've been almost puritanical in their attempt to remove anything with wit. Since the preview code I played a couple of months back, for example, they've removed the prologue where you find yourself floating in space wondering how you got there, and then placing the rest of the game in flashback. "Too clever," they presumably thought, "better get rid of that then".

On the purely aesthetic level, it's distinctly behind the times. For example, don't come expecting clever rag-doll physics, as there's none. On each level, you'll find yourself facing the opposition with at least – oooh – *one whole skin*. It's difficult to control your excitement when you reach one of the few levels where you'll face foes with *two* different appearances. There's similar re-using of design elements in the architecture, with each of the missions re-using elements constantly. Lovely sections – like the *Startopia*-styled Bio-level in the Moon-base – are memorable, through their rarity if nothing else.

But the main problem isn't that the opposition look the same, but simply that they *play* the same. The basic intelligence guiding your opposition isn't bad. The problem is that it doesn't alter from the first scene of the game to the last, each running and dodging in a completely identical

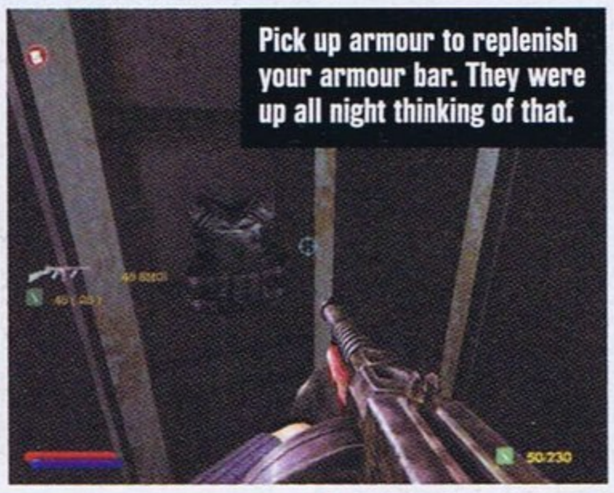
The lean function must be used to make progress, and works well.

SYSTEM MISER

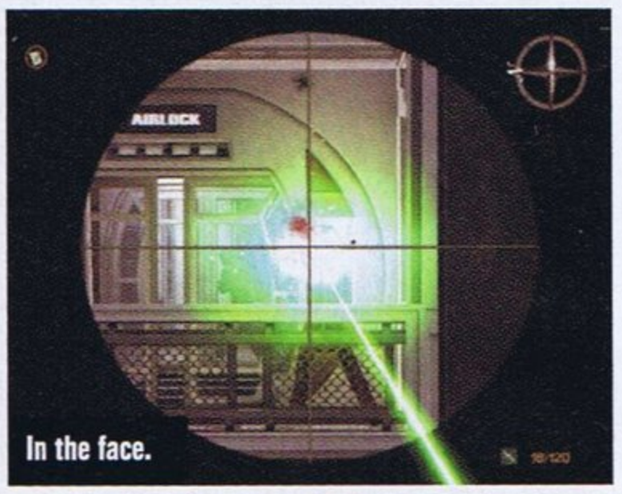
How *Contract J.A.C.K.* will play on *your* PC

■ Supported resolutions: **640x480 to 2048x1536** ■ Scaleable options: **32 bit colour only, triple buffer, detail level and more.**

VERDICT: **Abstractly, it should run fine with the minimum specs listed. Certainly, if you had no problem with *NOLF2* you probably shouldn't have major problems here. However, there were some odd incidences of slow-down, even on fairly hefty (2+ GHz PCs) at certain points. Since these occurred during cut-scenes, it doesn't really impact negatively against play.**



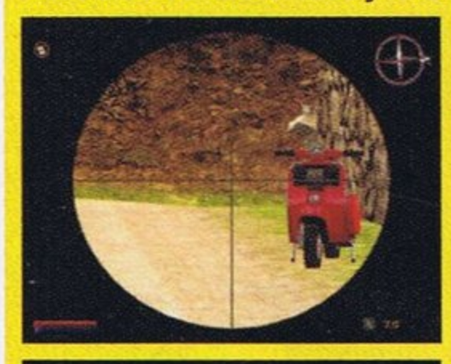
Pick up armour to replenish your armour bar. They were up all night thinking of that.



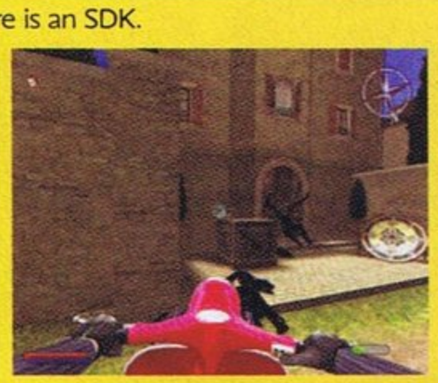
In the face.

WE ARE THE MODS

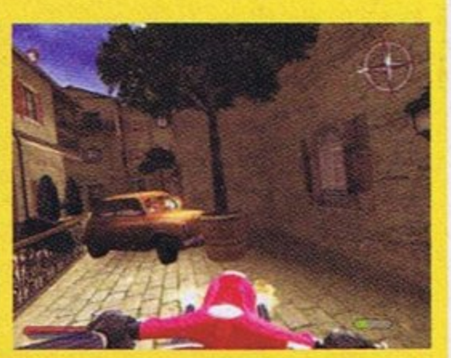
Not that sort of mods. Though there is an SDK.



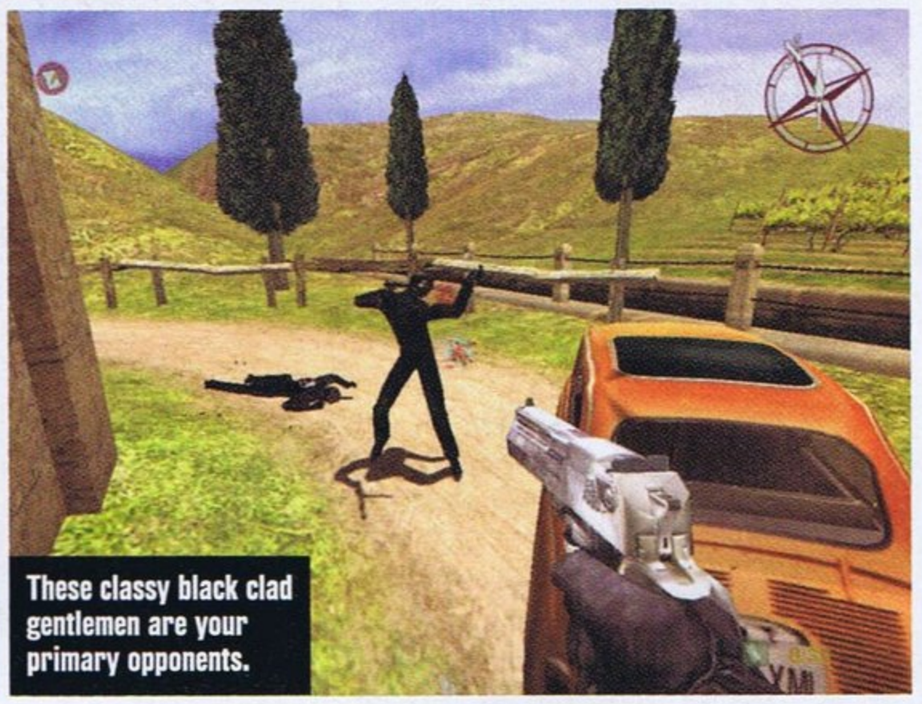
Ah – there's the fellow. A shiny red scooter is ideal for getting around in the modern, retro age. Let's give it a go shall we?



And we're off. The guns automatically lock on to targets, and you just have to be careful not to overheat them.



The main – and quite important – drawback is it handles like no wheeled vehicle known to man. Pah. I'll walk, thanks.



These classy black clad gentlemen are your primary opponents.

Assassinated

fashion. No matter whether they're Mafiosa or space-suited goons, don't expect your combat experience to change one iota. Compare to – say – *Halo* as an example of how better to do this. There's also minor annoyances, like the opponents being capable of feats which you are incapable of replicating. For example, they can assault you with their weapons when close up and throw grenades in a millisecond – often directly into your face, killing both of you. Smart guys. You have to laboriously make your way through the inventory system to duplicate similar moves. This means that rather than being able to think on your feet, you're forced into a reload situation.

Level design is both completely linear and virtually unguided. Often you find that you're entirely unsure what you're doing, where you're meant to be going to do it and why you're even doing it in the first place. So you just simply wander around until you find suitable things to press – more specific sub-objectives, like in *Call of Duty*, would have solved this. Equally, your path will loop through the entire base, as if being given a guided tour by the most anal and proud janitor imaginable. Even in 1998 this sort of level routing was passé, and when everyone else has learnt to hide it in a variety of means – *Max Payne 2*'s Mona/Max interactions, *Call of Duty* using danger to lead you where it wants you to go – it's somewhat embarrassing.

On the positive side, the humour purge hasn't been completely merciless, and there are some amusing touches to be found throughout the game. But with the terrible automatic deaths and the abominable steering on the vehicle sections, it's a case of having to laugh as otherwise you'd just cry. We've long gone past the stage where the simple joy of seeing a gun pointing out of the bottom of the screen can engender love or distraction, and thefirst casualty of the FPS war will hopefully be games like this. My one hope is that the team was somehow pressured by forces from above into making this. To think that the minds behind some of the most entertaining shooters of the last few years actually wanted to do this is the most depressing aspect of the whole enterprise.

KIERON GILLEN

PCGA PROFILE

Contract J.A.C.K. is:

- **A *NOLF* prequel**
- **Featuring some of its cast**
- **An electric shooting game**

Contract J.A.C.K. is not:

- **Worthy of the lineage**
- **Worthy of your time**
- **Worthy of *their* time**

■ Publisher **Vivendi** ■ Developer **Monolith** ■ Minimum System **PIII 733MHz, 128Mb RAM, 32MB 3D card, 1.8Gb HD Space** ■ Recommended **1GHz PIII, 256Mb RAM, 64Mb 3D card, 1.8Gb HD Space**
■ Multi-Player **Net/Lan, up to 16** ■ Web Address **nolf2.sierra.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Call of Duty
Probably the best highly-scripted shooter. US, UK and USSR – all together now.

Halo: Combat Evolved
Less scripted than *CoD*, and the place to go for AI-lead shooting. Exquisitely balanced.

PC GAMES addict

Totally uninspired. Interest expired. It's just too short too. Death to the 60s.

38%

GENRE: REAL-TIME STRATEGY

THE LORD OF THE RINGS THE WAR OF THE RING

Neither here nor there. It's more like Muddle-Earth.

Once a tower is captured using Gimli's Capture ability, it switches to the control of your team. You can garrison additional troops in it, or use workers to repair it.

The ring-bearer's anguish is largely lost in this game. Beards, however, are bold.

The nine Ring-Wraiths. After a cost-cutting execise.

The game trundles along like a loose shopping trolley.

If they look up, is there a giant face in the sky?

PREDICTABLE HEROICS

As with all RTS games of this ilk, the extra abilities of the hero characters are key. Gimli, aka Dwarf McDwarf, leader of the Dwarves, is able to, er, dwarf his opponents by capturing sentry towers and tossing other dwarves in to bolster the defence. Other characters, such as Gandalf the Great Actor have similar powers. About time developers found a new spin on hero characters so that columns like this became a thing of the past.

PCGA PROFILE

War of the Ring is:
- **Diluted**
- **Predictable**
- **Efficient**

War of the Ring is not:
- **Without merit**
- **Gripping**
- **Hobbitchin'**

EVEN for those of us who are now making jokes about being Bored of the Rings, there should be much to like about *The War of the Ring*. Not least the fact that it is a game based on the superb *Battle Realms*, a Japanese-styled RTS that shifted conventional expectations. That game might not have sold more than a slight clutch, but at least developer monkeys Liquid Entertainment are putting all that hard work to use: **attractively presented and superficially pleasing to the senses, *War of the Ring* demonstrates that these chaps still have some idea of what they're up to.**

But the questions soon mount up. Like, why it is that *The Lord of The Rings*, possibly the most important fantasy world of all time, is being given little more than the resurrected corpse of an ageing and unsuccessful strategy title for its latest gaming incarnation? And more importantly, why has the charm and lustre of *Battle Realms* been lost?

Where's Gandalf's hat? You can't be a wizard without a hat.

Orcward

It seems that *War of The Ring* is little more than an attempt to turn *Lord of the Rings* into the most popular of real-time strategy games: *Warcraft III*. Sadly for us, however, *War of the Ring* is nowhere near that standard. The presentation is pretty enough, but the whole game is going through the motions, copying *Warcraft*'s moves without the panache. This is a game that provides you with no real reason to keep on playing. It's average on all fronts.

What do you get for your hard-earned platinum? *War of the Ring* provides a sweeping slice of the action leading up to the fall of Mordor, in two non-linear campaigns. The first is from the perspective of the allies: the Dwarves, the Elves and the Humans, as they battle Sauron's forces across Middle-Earth. This campaign is a string of small-scale combat missions, led by a selection of heroes from the books. All the heroes have contrived special powers, with which most of the missions will be won. It's not much of a challenge to an experienced RTS player, although on occasion it's not clear what you should be doing. And those people conditioned by the drama of the films will be sorely disappointed: Helm's Deep is reduced to half a dozen orcs attacking you here and there; it's really nothing special. If you wade through this campaign then you are asked to try to fight the war from the Dark One's perspective. This is, in some ways, more interesting, and rather counter-intuitively, much harder. Trolls and Dark Riders are lots of fun indeed.

War of The Ring is a disappointment and a game that will no doubt soon be lost in the sands of time. Anyone who's already digested more senior strategy titles in the last year or two will find little sustenance here.

JIM ROSSIGNOL

■ Publisher **Vivendi Universal** ■ Developer **Liquid Entertainment** ■ Minimum System **PIII 600, 128Mb RAM, 3D card** ■ Recommended **P4 1GHz, 256Mb RAM, GeForce 3 or better** ■ Multi-Player **LAN, internet, four players** ■ Web Address **www.warofthering.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

PC GAMES addict
Forsakes the epic vision of Middle-Earth to follow the beat of a middling RTS drum.

68%

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

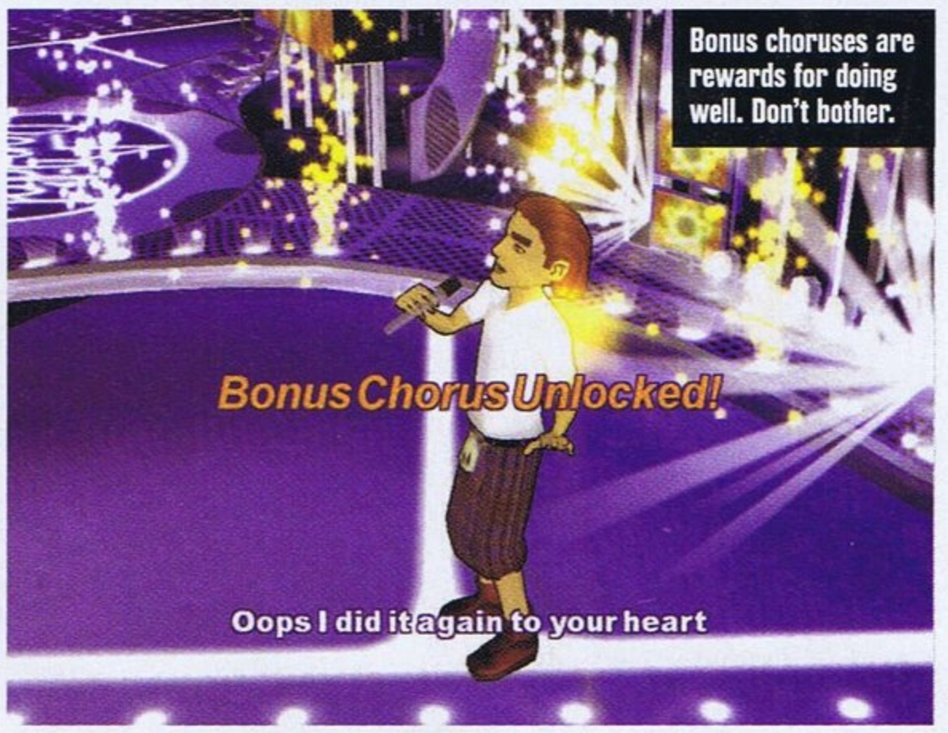
Warcraft III: Frozen Throne
This expansion pack for the excellent *Warcraft III* excels in every way.

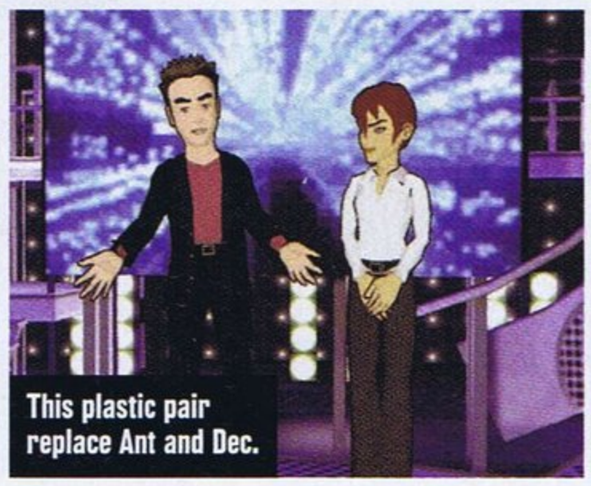
UFO: Aftermath
A bit shaky in places, but an otherwise inventive and intelligent strategy game.

POP IDOL

GENRE: RHYTHM ACTION

Can't sing. Can't dance. Will go about as far as a Rik Waller long jump.





Scowl

THIS is what *Pop Idol* does well: the sets are almost perfect recreations of the television series. The selection of music is appropriately balletic. You can dress your character in a suitably pre-pubescent boy band wardrobe. Simon Cowell is as likeable as ever. Here's what it does badly: everything else.

Rhythm action games are essentially a distillation of the videogame fundamentals: interaction and base response. We enjoy pushing buttons to get a response, or so the theory goes. Games usually provide us with a visual cue, like an explosion, or an enemy running on screen, to interact with. Rhythm action provides us with a different kind of cue: a simple beat.

Where *Pop Idol* differs is that you have to follow the rhythm of a vocal track. When you're performing on stage, arrows drip down a crosshair; when they reach the centre you press the cursor key in the appropriate direction. Occasionally, you need to hold down a key for a few moments, or a couple of arrows may appear at the same time. At that point, you'll need to tap the buttons in quick succession. Do well and the public will eat from your hand. Do badly, and your voice will break, screeching and growling around the melody. Your public will eat you alive.

Let's make it clear right now. *Pop Idol* isn't receiving such a low score because it's a rhythm action game. That 30 percent

"*Pop Idol* is a *terrible* rhythm action game."

is because it's a *terrible* rhythm action game. The new concept of tapping along to a vocal track instead of a beat doesn't work. The melodies on offer simply aren't distinctive enough to convince you that you're actually in time with the music.

The main game, where you attempt to woo the public, is a joke. Audition stages act as a prelude, before moving on to the finals. When you reach the studio you're never given any sense that you're competing: the other contestants exist in name only; you never see them perform, you never see how they're doing. All you see is the results of the 'phone vote', an percentage figure and a list of names.

And it's all so ridiculously easy. On the first attempt, I unlocked every spare stage, and became *the* Pop Idol. Even the hardest difficulty doesn't stand up to concentrated play.

We can see that this isn't necessarily aimed at us, but even the kiddies who buy into glorified karaoke will find only an hour's worth of entertainment here. The TV show finds its entertainment in failure, gaining a cheap laugh watching young hopefuls have their expectations dashed. How poetic then, that so little entertainment can be found in this failure.

ROSS ATHERTON

HOT SLACKS

Before each audition you're allowed to choose your outfit, supposedly to match the song you'll be performing. We have some doubts concerning the plausibility of this sartorial aspect of the game. How exactly did Dave Elvis, new Pop Idol, make it big wearing a white tux, boy-band goatee and a beanie? As if.

PCGA PROFILE

Pop Idol is:
- **Poop Idol**
- **Bone Idle**
- **Mock Idol**

Pop Idol is not:
- **Evergreen**
- **Christmas number one**
- **Worth the silicon it's printed on**

■ Publisher **Codemasters** ■ Developer **Hothouse Creations** ■ Price **£30** ■ Minimum System **PIII 700MHz, 128Mb, 32Mb graphics card** ■ Recommended **P4 1.2GHz, 256Mb RAM, 64Mb graphics card**
■ Multi-Player **Four** ■ Web Address **www.codemasters.co.uk/popidol** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Let's Dance Europe PCG 86, 77%
Jump up and down in time to musical arrows on the included dance mat.

Karaoke
Wander down to your local pub, and sing. Receive the adulation of tens of people.

PC GAMES addict
Gives rhythm action a bad name. Wannabe a superstar? Don't start with this.

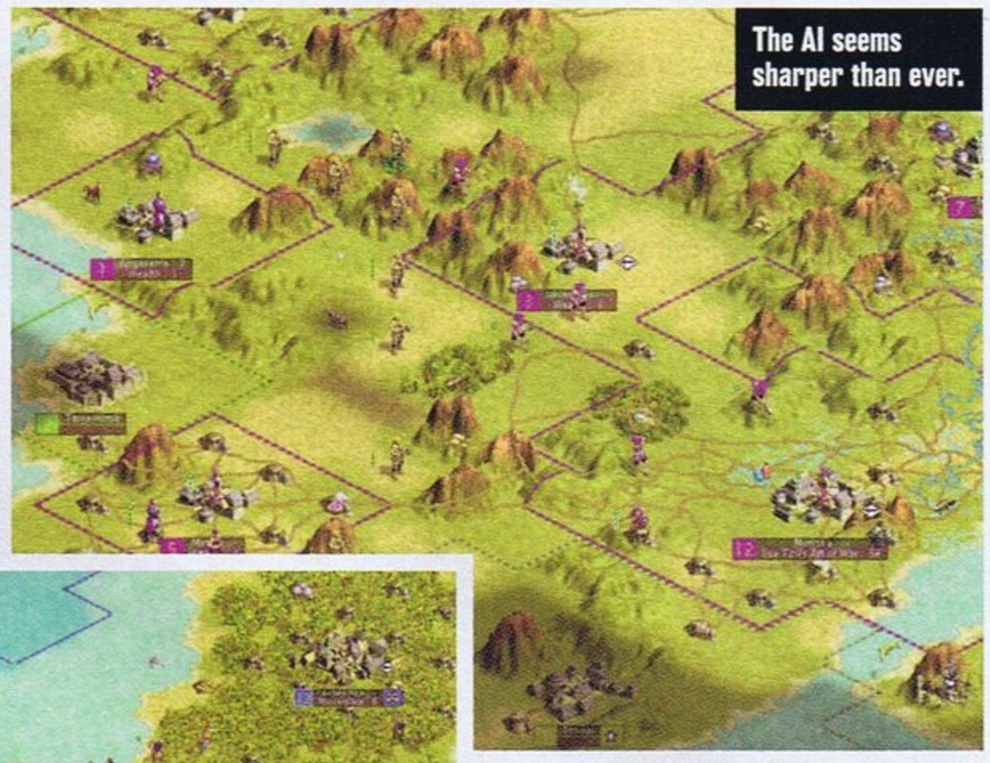
30%

GENRE: TURN-BASED STRATEGY

CIVILIZATION III CONQUESTS

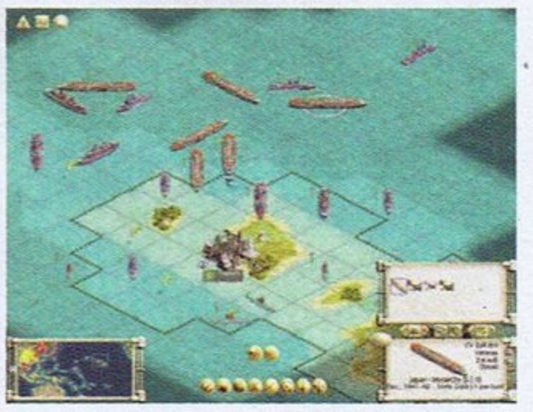
"Heartily recommended." A. Hitler.

Jungle is your friend in Mesoamerica.



The AI seems sharper than ever.

Any friend of the Little Corporal better beware the Brits in 19th Century Europe.



DASTARDLY & MUTLI

Perhaps it's just my copy, but splashed across the corner of the box cover in prominent capitals are not one but two glaring typos. "MUTLIPLAYER" is almost forgivable but "CIVILAZATIONS" is just plain disgraceful. Atari clearly need to work towards the Writing advance.

PCGA PROFILE

Conquests is:
- Addictive
- Root and branch reform
- Simon Schama

Conquests is not:
- Standalone
- The cure for all MP ills
- For the impatient

THE news from Iraq makes me nervous. So many US troops stationed in Baghdad. Don't those Washington wallahs know how dangerous that is? The city could culture flip any minute and they could lose the lot. Why don't they just stay on the outskirts, whittle down the population (and hence the resistance) through forced starvation and then build it up again with an influx of American settlers? Or why didn't they simply raze the place when they had the chance and start afresh? New Baghdad. Population 1. Currently building granary.

It's almost as if Dubya and his deputies had never played *Civ3* or the impressive, inventive expansion pack *Conquests*.

At the heart of this super supplement are nine historical scenarios that prove just how wonderfully malleable the *Civ* engine is. More miniature mods than scenarios really, the episodes feature bespoke maps, rules, and techs all testament to some serious background research from the folks at Firaxis. Take the absorbing Mesoamerican game for example...

Set amongst the Pre-Columbian cultures of central America in the years before the Conquistador onslaught, it's awash with custom customers like the Chasqui Scout (able to enslave a defeated foe) and the Silent Hunter (an assassin that can single out the weak and the wounded) and packed with new *az*techs and urban improvements. Stir in a reworked range of resources (jade, llamas, chocolate...) great new play concepts like ritual sacrifice and government by blood cult, and tailored

Extenciv

"Proves just how malleable the *Civ* engine is."

victory conditions, and you've got a *Civ* experience that's as fresh as it is fascinating.

Switch to the medieval Shogun turf-war, the post-Pearl Harbour Pacific campaign, the pair of scenarios that recreate the rise and fall of the Roman empire, in fact any of the other authored offerings and you see equally clever customising. A number of the tribes, units and wonders that debut in the conquest conversions also appear in the heavily tweaked epic game. Benefiting from changes as small as subtle unit stat adjustments and as sizeable as new ideologies (jackboots at the ready) and national traits (Britannia now really rules the waves), those 6,000-year random-map marathons play better than ever.

Eight of *Conquests'* 15 extra tribes first surfaced in the *Play the World* add-on. That pack, included in its entirety in this one, finally delivered multi-player to the huddled masses albeit with attendant lag, connectivity grief, and crashes. I'd like to say that these frustrating wrinkles had been ironed-out in its successor but though things do seem better, there are still niggles. Are these reason enough to leave a fine solo play supplement languishing on the shelves of your local game grotto? Most definitely not.

TIM STONE

■ Publisher **Atari** ■ Developer **Firaxis** ■ Minimum System **PII 900, 128Mb, 4Mb video card.**
■ Recommended **P4 1GHz, 512Mb RAM, broadband for MP** ■ Multi-Player **LAN, Internet, up to eight players, hotseat, PBEM** ■ Web Address **www.civ3.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

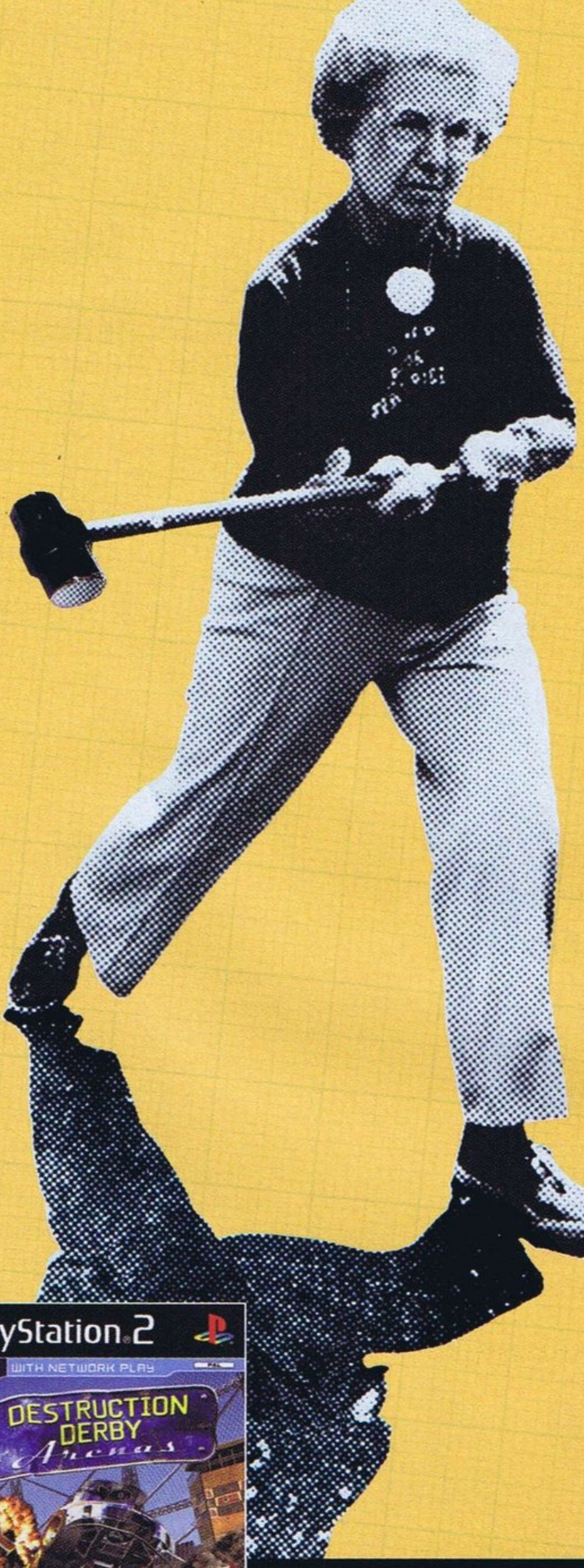
Rise of Nations
Civ for the man on the go. MP matches take minutes rather than months.

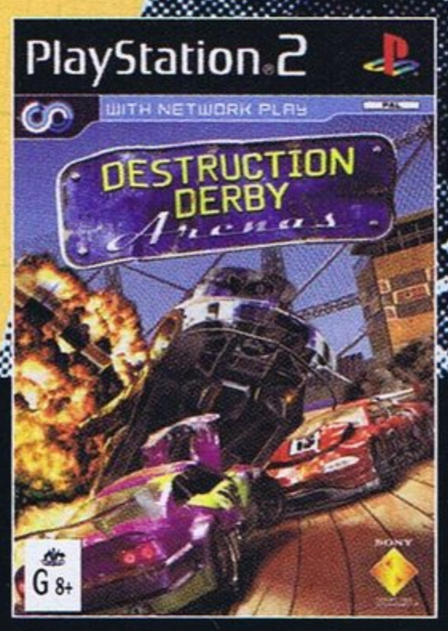
Galactic Civilisations
Low budget *MOO3* mangler with an expansion pack imminent.

PC GAMES addict
History in the making. No discerning despot should be without this ample adjunct.

80%

"So my fruitcake isn't moist enough, eh, Vera?"





Pick a grudge. Any grudge. Destruction Derby Arenas.

Want to settle old scores? Then cut mates down to size playing split-screen. Play online with the network adaptor or simply battle it out offline. With 20 muscle cars and 18 tracks to choose from, just be careful who you cross.

www.ddarenas.com

fun, anyone?

PlayStation.2

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GENRE: REAL-TIME STRATEGY

LORDS OF EVERQUEST

Snorecraft III: The Frozen Groan.

Isn't there a single development team on the planet capable of getting scale right?

Beat out a rhythm on your enemy's base. Or not.

TRAAAAAAAAA AAAAAAAAAIN!

SANDING WOOD ELVES

If there is one slightly redeeming feature to this whole mess – the key word being 'if' – it's that it does occasionally have a wry sense of humour. In particular, every level loads up with an assortment of random messages, including "Attaching Beards To Dwarves", "Have You Hugged an Iksar Today?" and a fair few references to other *Everquest* characters and expressions. Also, the credits sequence has a few jokes in it. Sadly, the game itself is played pretty straight – simple matters like 'character' having no real place on the battlefield, it would seem.

SAKTI'S breasts are making me nauseous. It's not her fault – I accept total blame. In fact, without that little window in the bottom-left of the screen depicting her thundering bosom smashing up and down like a pair of insane bald twins, I'd soon forget that there was anything at all to say about *Lords of Everquest*. Not, I hasten to add, that they are in any way a feature of the game. If you're looking for a peep-show, Pinnochio's better-stacked sister really isn't going to offer you anything that you couldn't get from a Google search, but she's perfectly representative of the game as a whole: cheap and more than a little tacky.

This fantasy RTS wants to be *Warcraft III* so much that it hurts. Quite literally. My head's been throbbing for hours now. *Lords* is so mind-numbingly banal that even remembering the experience requires matchsticks firmly shoved under the eyelids. There is simply very little of note. *Warcraft III* hit the streets with a flurry of excitement, offering (then) decent graphics, a good storyline, excellent mission design, a huge multi-player mode and splendid cinematics. *Lords of Everquest* gives you John Rhys-Davies out-schlocking his performance as Gimli, no story worth speaking of, LAN-based proof that a problem shared really isn't a problem halved, and graphics whose sole redeeming feature is that they are indeed very reminiscent of *Everquest* proper. Bit of a shame that *Everquest* is five years old.

"..Wants to be *Warcraft III* so much that it hurts."

The meat, odd-smelling ham that it is, is provided by the three single-player campaigns: one for the evil Shadowrealm, one for the Eldaar Aliance and a final outing with the Dawn Brotherhood. Each group offers you a different selection of Lord, each with their own character class and skills taken from the *Everquest* RPG – including evil necromancer Lord Skass, noble bard Lady Briana and Gult... yes, really... a giant frog with a mace. Each has their own resistance to various types of attack, not to mention spells and magical auras to boost the power of nearby troops, but the real *Everquest* connection is that they, like their troops, level up over time. The more they fight, the stronger they get: the stronger they get, the more spells and other powers they receive. All by-the-book stuff, although completists will no doubt enjoy the 'Ding!' sound at the end of each stage.

Everyone else can ignore this, and instead spend their time playing that fantastic game 'Guess the Voiceover'. One area where *Lords of Everquest* has pulled out all of the stops is in casting: it's not so much *Lord of the Rings* as an Out of Work Sci-Fi Actor convention. *Farscape*'s Claudia Black, *Star Trek*'s Dwight Schultz, *Voyager*'s Kate Mulgrew, *Futurama*'s Katey Sagal and, oh my goodness, is that the time? Still, it would be unfair not to mention that Wendee Lee gives a great performance as 'Voice of the Interface'.

Nevertheless, this brings us to perhaps *Lords of Everquest*'s most baffling

Don't cry, Thog. See? I put down whip.

In the bitter, feuding *Everquest* world, war really is heck.

With a clash of swords, Yogi Bear met his match.

SYSTEM MISER

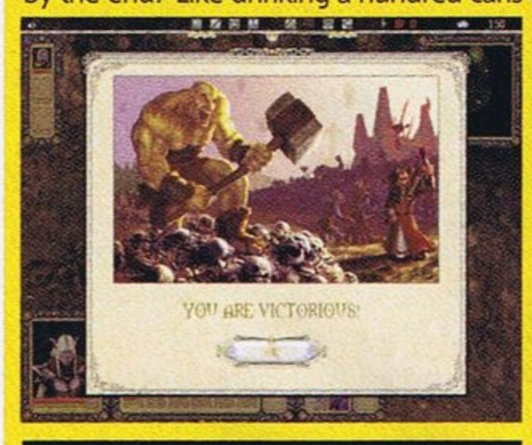
How *Lords of Everquest* will play on *your* PC.

- Supported resolutions: **800x600 – maximum, 16/32bit colour**
- Scaleable options: **Rendering quality**

VERDICT: **Chugs away on a baseline system, without anything to show for it. Bland special effects, low-polygon monsters and not much background detail either. Not one to show off to friends with. Turning the rendering down from High does make things a lot smoother, but loses out on the few high-points that *LoE* is occasionally capable of offering.**

MOMENTS THAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN COOL, BUT WEREN'T

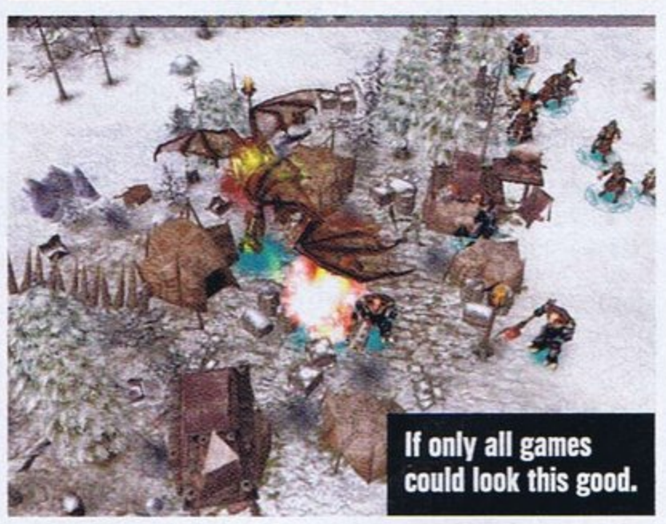
You know those days when, you know, you do something you should have had fun with, but it just doesn't seem all that great by the end? Like drinking a hundred cans of cola only to spend the evening micturating actual acid? It can happen.



The guy on the left's certainly having a good time. All he does is slam down his hammer into someone's face.

Yes, it's a level-up, but does it enhance your life? No, it just gives you more responsibilities – more stuff to do.

This monster showed up, and we were all 'Waargh!' and he was like 'Graaagh!' and... No, wait. That was in *Everquest*.



If only all games could look this good.

Feudal

omission. The whole point of the RPG was to create your own character and go questing, yet there's not the slightest scrap of such player freedom here. Even in the multiplayer mode, where voiceovers are limited to cries of "By the blood!" and other such olde-worlde rubbish, you're stuck with the pre-generated Lords. This makes no sense. Why can't we recreate our noble Paladins or evil Wizards or whatever else from the game proper and send them into battle?

Properly reviewing *Lords of Everquest* is more a matter of pointing out what it *doesn't* do than explaining what you get for your money. If this is Norrath, why are we wandering through fields and canyons that could be anything from Middle-Earth to Middlesborough? Why aren't we valiantly defending the streets of Freeport from attack, or sneaking noble thieves into Oggok or in fact doing anything except stamping through maps with vaguely familiar names?

Above all else, why is this such a *Warcraft*-style RTS? Even when it tries to offer something suitably *Everquest*-like, such as a character's spells, the scrum-based action all but dictates that everyone's just going to be firing them off as often as humanly (or dwarfly or elfly or Froglokly) possible, restricting you to the same action as every other game of the type. Why not a low-level tactical game, with a... wait for it... 'party' of heroes working as a team to solve missions, instead of soldier generators springing out of the ground and the lovely Ms. Lee – excellent job in Cowboy Bebop, by the way, ma'am – constantly warning you about your platinum shortage. Even *Warcraft III* has yet to fully nail that kind of strategy, leaving an actual niche in the market to fill.

But no. Instead, we got this. Not even worth it for *Everquest* completists – you'd have a better chance of hitting strategy nirvana by wandering into your local game store and chucking a brick.

RICHARD COBBETT

PCGA PROFILE

Lords of Everquest is:
- **Slack**
- **Dull**
- **Lazy**

Lords of Everquest is not:
- **Epic**
- **Role-playing**
- **Action**

■ Publisher **Ubi Soft** ■ Developer **Rapid Eye Entertainment** ■ Minimum System **PIII 1GHz, 256Mb RAM, 32Mb 3D card** ■ Recommended **P4 1.5GHz, 512Mb RAM, 64Mb 3D card** ■ Multi-Player **LAN, internet, up to 12** ■ Web Address **lordsofeverquest.station.sony.com/** ■ Release Date **Out now**

PC GAMES addict

Tawdry, tedious cash-in blandness without charm and or personality.

40%

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

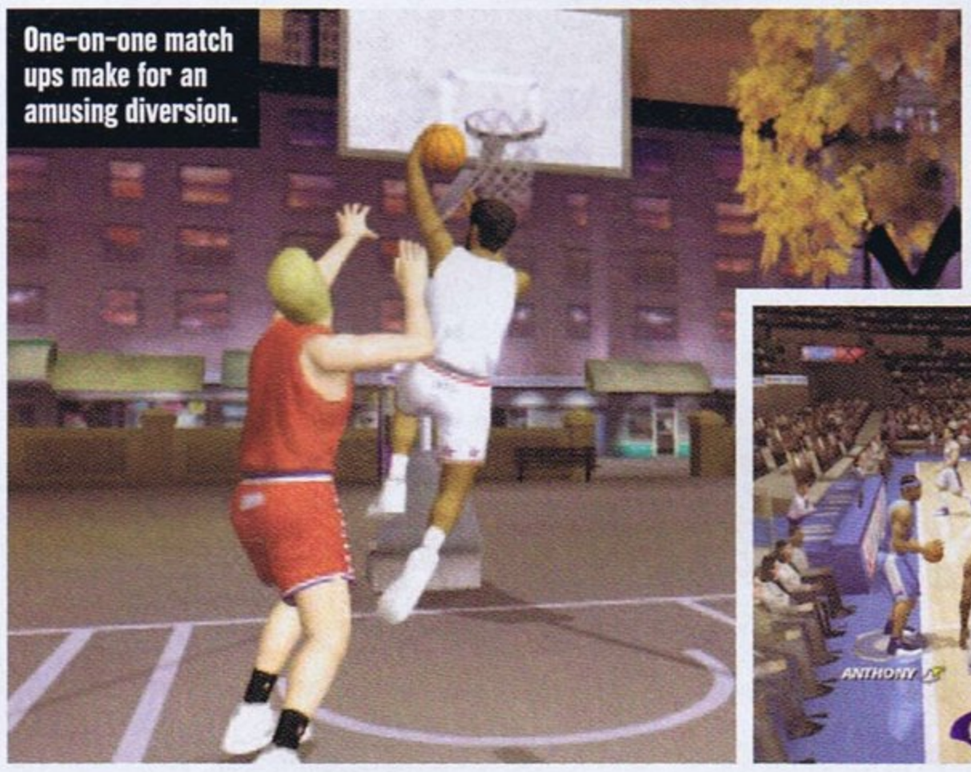
Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos
The master of the house, quick to catch your eye. Good game too.

Rise Of Nations
Fast-paced combo of *Age Of Empires* and *Civilization*, with a great multiplayer option.

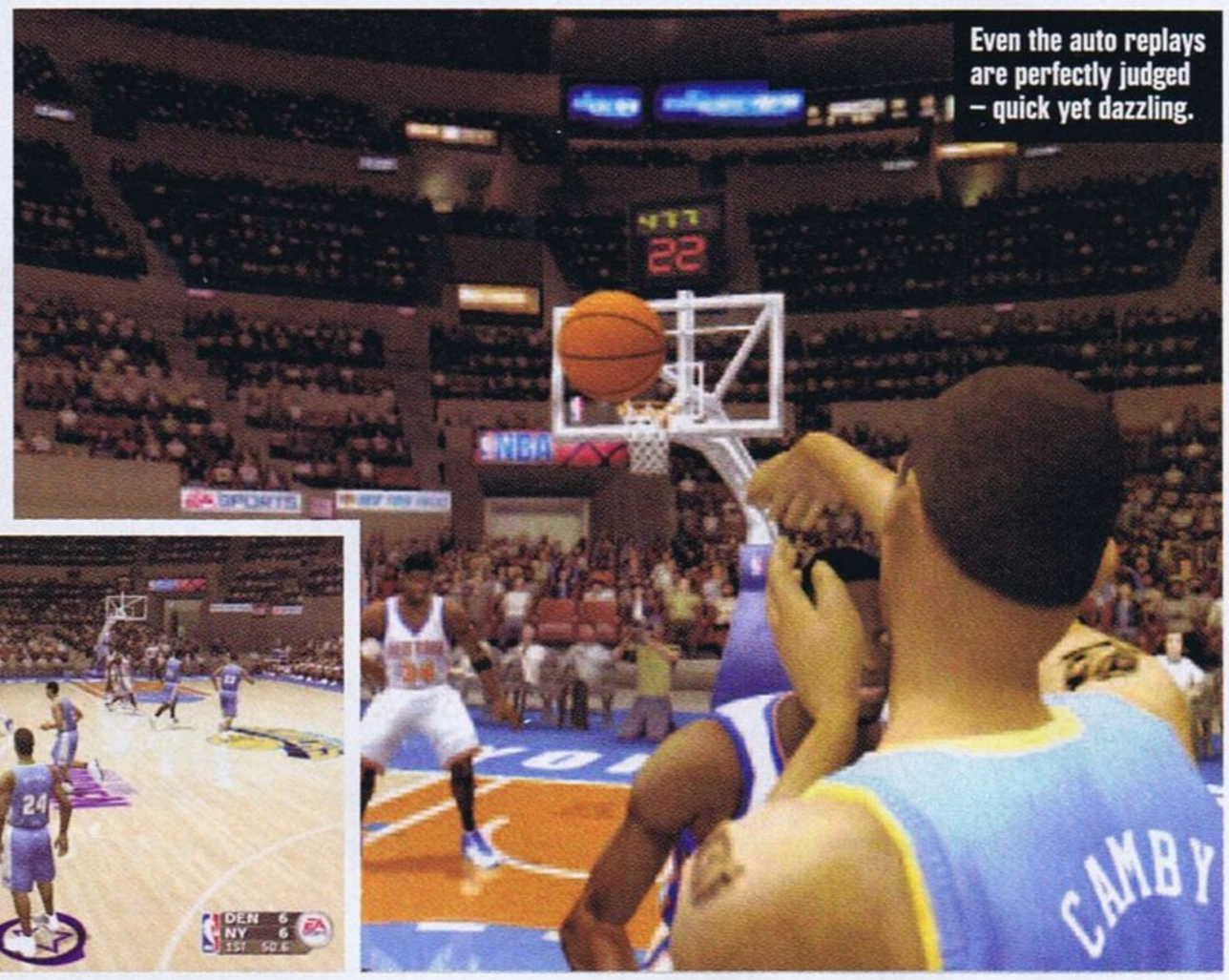
GENRE: SPORTS

NBA LIVE 2004

Have there really been 2,004 *NBA Live* sequels? We thought it was only 1,973.



One-on-one match ups make for an amusing diversion.



Even the auto replays are perfectly judged – quick yet dazzling.

ALL DONE WITH MAGNETS

In arcade mode, the ball sometimes defies physics. Pass it in for an allez-oop or lay up and it'll fly normally in the vicinity of the basket. But, when the intended receiver jumps up to get it, if the ball's not on course it will magically shift sideways in the air to meet their hands. Just remember to tell your opponent: it's the game cheating, not you.

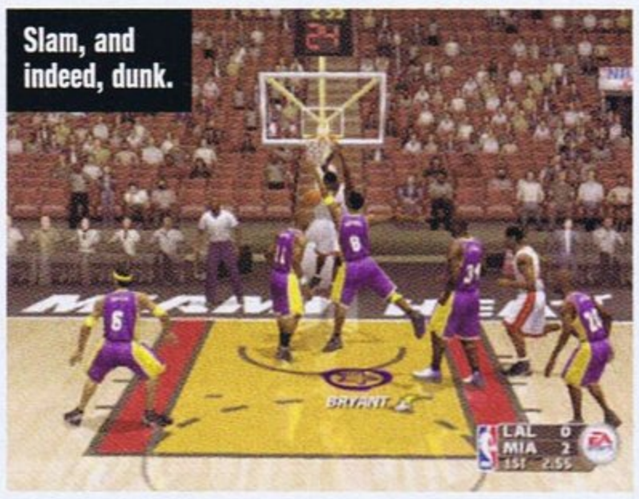
PCGA PROFILE

NBA Live 2004 is:
- **An arcade romp**
- **A challenging simulation**
- **With added Sean Paul on the soundtrack**

NBA Live 2004 is not:
- **Going to have to wait long for a sequel**
- **About weaving**
- **Rejected**

TEN years. That's how long I've been reviewing EA's various takes on basketball. *Bulls Versus Blazers* on the Super Nintendo was my first. It was, well, pretty lame in hindsight. You see, recent birthday celebrations have made me somewhat nostalgic as I play this latest incarnation. No, not nostalgic – reflective. It's all too easy to **regard each new EA Sports title as just another point in the pell-mell passage of the PC gaming year. Of course, EA's policy of updating brands to death doesn't help matters, but credit where it's due: *NBA Live 2004* is the zenith of modern sports sim design.**

Basic principles are all that remain from the very first incarnations of the series: the double press for accurate shooting, the division of blocking and stealing, the fetish for statistics. Gone are the rudimentary mechanics and the non-existent AI that only delivered some strange hieroglyph of basketball. In their stead, there's a sophisticated simulation that captures the subtlety and athleticism of the sport.



Slam, and indeed, dunk.

There's attacking. Simple lay-ups, arching three-pointers, outlandish allez-oops and slam-dunks – they're all here. They're instantly gratifying in arcade mode at rookie settings, but skills to be mastered in simulation mode on the higher difficulty levels. Then, there's defence. It took EA a lot longer to crack this particular nut but here it works like a dream. It also happens to be the key to winning games, whatever level you play at.

"The zenith of modern sports sim design."

You can't rely on your AI-controlled teammates to do the business defensively – a fault in many previous versions of this game – so if you want to win, you have to get involved. Blocking passing lanes, double-teaming, rebounding, stealing, everything matters. And even if you don't stop your opponent shooting, there's still a chance that you may put them off enough to miss. It's a formula that makes for games which leave you reeling from their intense ebb and flow, relishing every triple angle replay, regretting every opportunity missed through your own cocky showboating.

Visually, *NBA Live 2004* is impressive, with excellent player animation and a default half court view that works almost perfectly – occasional, inadvertent backcourt violations are the only drawback. As for the game modes, the 82-game season with play-offs is enough for me but there's sufficient variety here to satisfy anyone.

And returning to the subject of sequels... how does this stack up against its immediate predecessor, you ask? The defence is improved, especially in the paint, and the expanded Dynasty mode could now keep you busy until *NBA Live 2005*. There's also a new commentary team, naturally. It looks better than ever, and the finely tuned difficulty settings make it an approachable yet lasting challenge, a joy to play and a thrill to master. So, sequel it may be, and an evolution rather than a revolution, but make no mistake, *NBA Live 2004* is up there with the best sports sims around.

CHRIS BUXTON

■ Publisher **EA** ■ Developer **In-house** ■ Minimum System **PIII 600, 128Mb RAM, 32Mb 3D card, 1.5Gb HD space, gamepad** ■ Recommended **PIII 800, 256Mb RAM, dual analogue stick pad**
■ Multi-Player **LAN, internet, up to eight players** ■ Web Address **www.ea.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

NBA Live 2003
Should be a cheaper option, compromising modernity but not quality.

FIFA 2004
Another great EA Sports title, and you're more likely to find opponents.

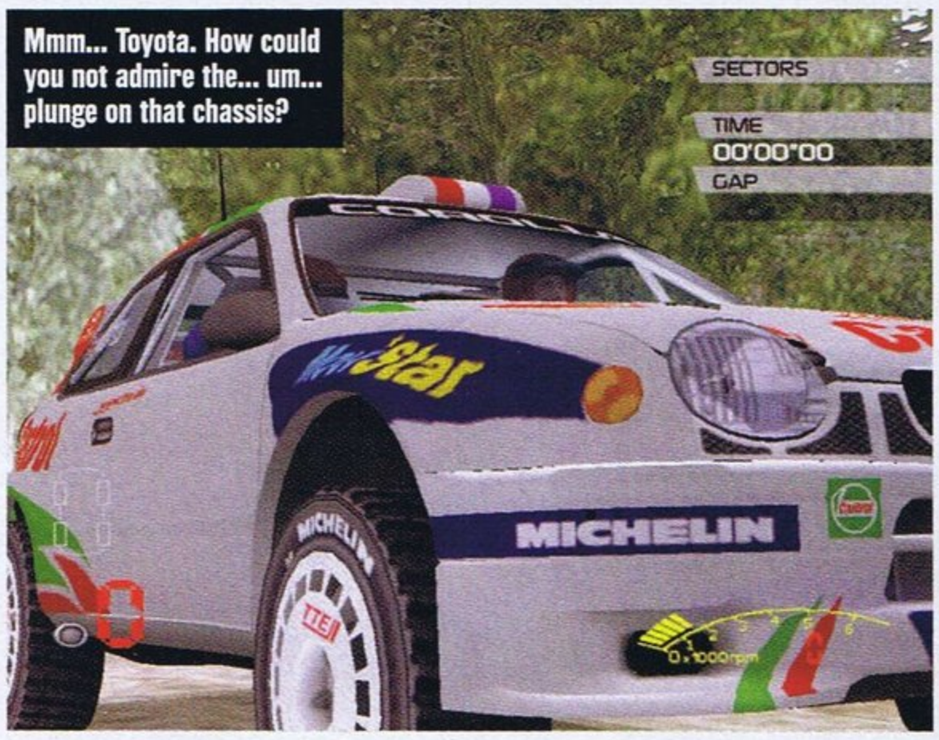
PC GAMES addict
EA refine arguably their finest one more time. Polished, cultured, playable.

88%

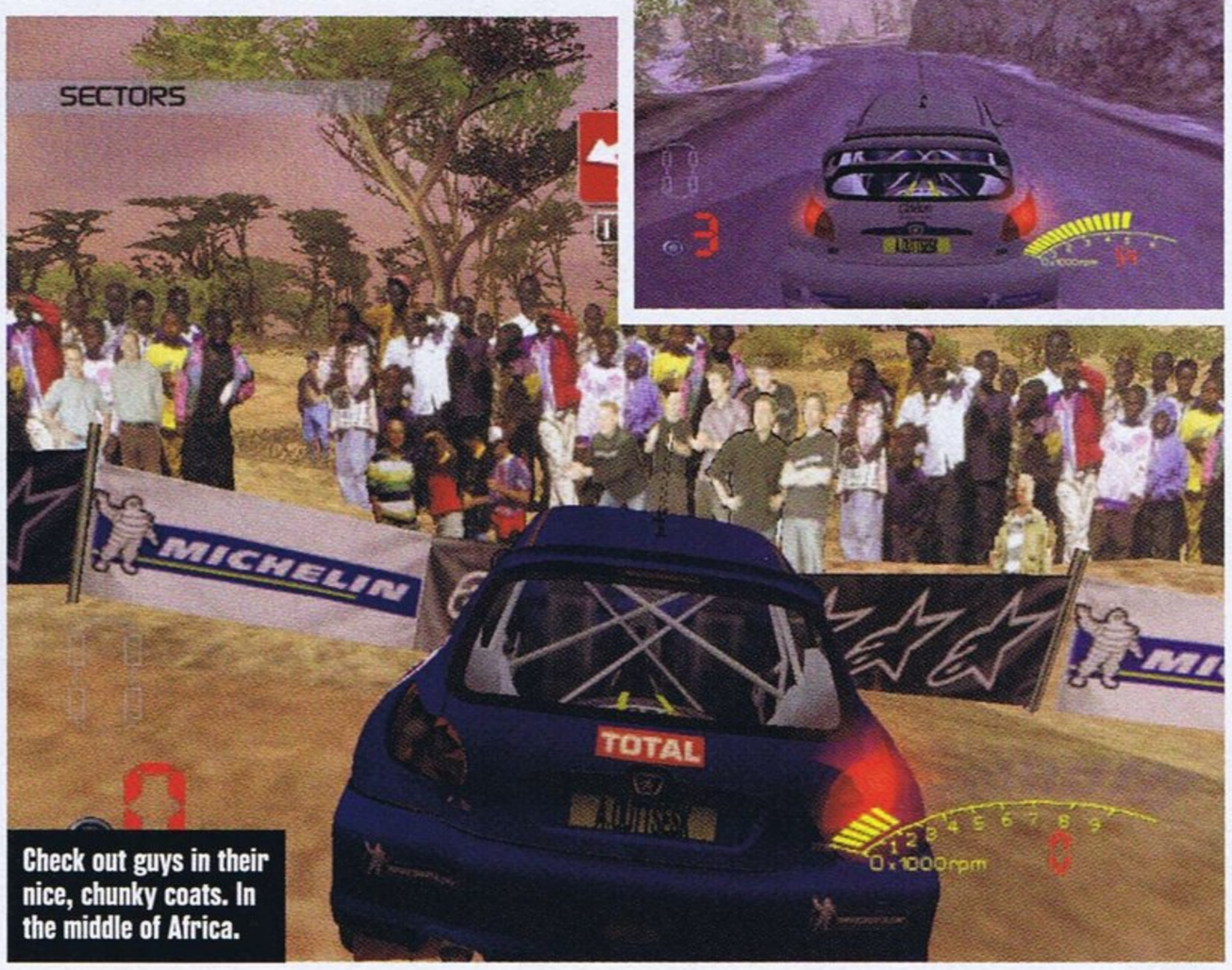
GENRE: RACING

V-RALLY 3

In a post-apocalyptic deathscape, *you* are humanity's last... No, sorry. It's a rally game.



Mmm... Toyota. How could you not admire the... um... plunge on that chassis?



Hitting the alpine heights. Sadly, no roof rack, and no room for flugel horns.

Check out guys in their nice, chunky coats. In the middle of Africa.

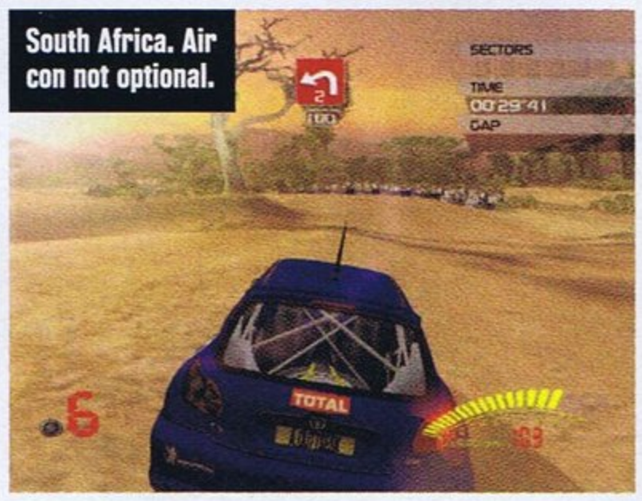
PC DELUXE

V-Rally 3 may have been around the block in console terms, but at least Eden/Atari can claim plenty of PC-exclusive tweaks – including ultra high-res, better car dynamics, improved weather effects, more peripheral support, and, naturally, scaleable graphic options to keep it purring along nice and smoothly.

YES, we know. Why oh why, etc. For hardcore rally loons, there's the arcade zip and slinky looks of *Rallisport Challenge* over here, and the more authentic, sim-leaning *Colin McRae Rally 3* over there. Do we really need another by-the-numbers console-port rally game? Does that sound like a rhetorical question? Well, does it?

V-Rally 3 is, in the way of most games that insist on you hurling a tuned and tarted up power-car around inappropriate terrain at silly speeds, a bit of a laugh. Problem is, the whole rallying thing is a restrictive little sub-genre which has been more or less conquered and, bar some jolly, licensed little twist (*Krazy Kartoon Rally: The Simpsons vs The Sims*, anyone?), it's all blurring into one stodgy slab of Rally-Game Fudge.

So, sadly, the most challenging question available is – what do you expect from a rally game? You have to hand it to *V-Rally 3* for ticking off every conceivable factor: lots of locations (England, Africa, Finland, Sweden, Germany... four races in each); Career ('V-Rally' Mode); Quick Race (standard Time Attack mode and a tweaked version, where the game sets challenges based on car/track/time); licensed cars (Ford Focus, Mitsubishi Lancer, Subaru Impreza...). All present and correct.



South Africa. Air con not optional.

"Behind the front-end, this is My First Rally Game."

V-Rally mode is based around the once-interesting, now-standard 'office' hub, where your driver receives emails from potential sponsors, and manages a current contract. The central thrill here lies in driving well enough to meet your sponsor's requirements, or suffer the inconvenience of having them remove their logos and funding. Maybe we're strange, but, in the flighty, anything-goes fantasy zone of computer gaming, we like there to be a little more at stake than whether the execs at Toyota are our best friends or not.

Looks... fine. Plenty of believable weather ambience, pleasing sun-flare and car damage – although the character models are pretty trashy (the choice of driver is limited to either 'Bland Guy With Two Eyes, A Nose And Mouth' or 'Blander Guy With Two Smaller Eyes, A Nose And Slightly Wonkier Mouth'). Driving: as in real life, insist on Manual to impress other petrolheads or stay sane and stick with Auto. Once you get into the driving, though, it's clear that, beneath the solid and sensible front-end, this is My First Rally Game. The handling is so hilariously lunging and remedial, it seems strange to even bother with the tune-up/tyre-change business.

So – *Rallisport Challenge*... arcadey. *Colin McRae Rally 3*... simmy. *V-Rally 3*... would like to be somewhere in the middle, but bent more towards the arcadey angle by the over-simplified, Scalextric car handling. Please, now. No more.

ANDY LOWE

PCGA PROFILE

V-Rally 3 is:
- Playable
- Nippy
- Adequate

V-Rally 3 is not:
- Great
- Polished
- Compulsive

■ Publisher **Atari** ■ Developer **Eden Studios** ■ Minimum System **PIII 800, 128Mb RAM, 1.8Gb hard disk space, 32Mb 3D card** ■ Recommended **1.2GHz, 256Mb RAM, 64MB 3D card** ■ Multi-Player **Up to four** ■ Web Address **www.v-rally.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Colin McRae Rally 2
Not the latest version, but there's just something simmier about this one.

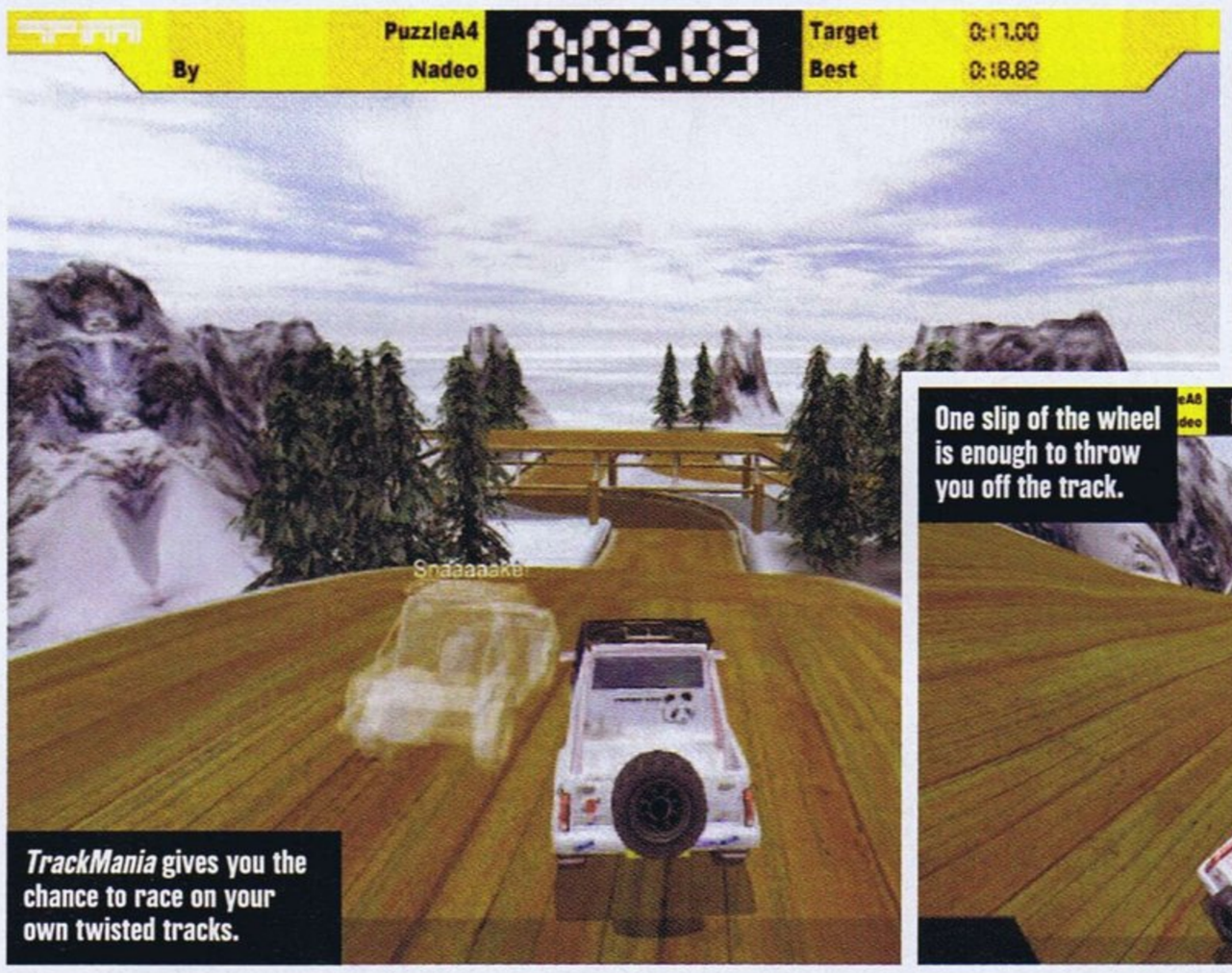
Rallisport Challenge
Not such a complete package as *CMR 2* (or *3*), but better looking and more arcadey.

PC GAMES addict
Not terrible, not great. Certainly not for serious rally fans. Rally VeryLite.
58%

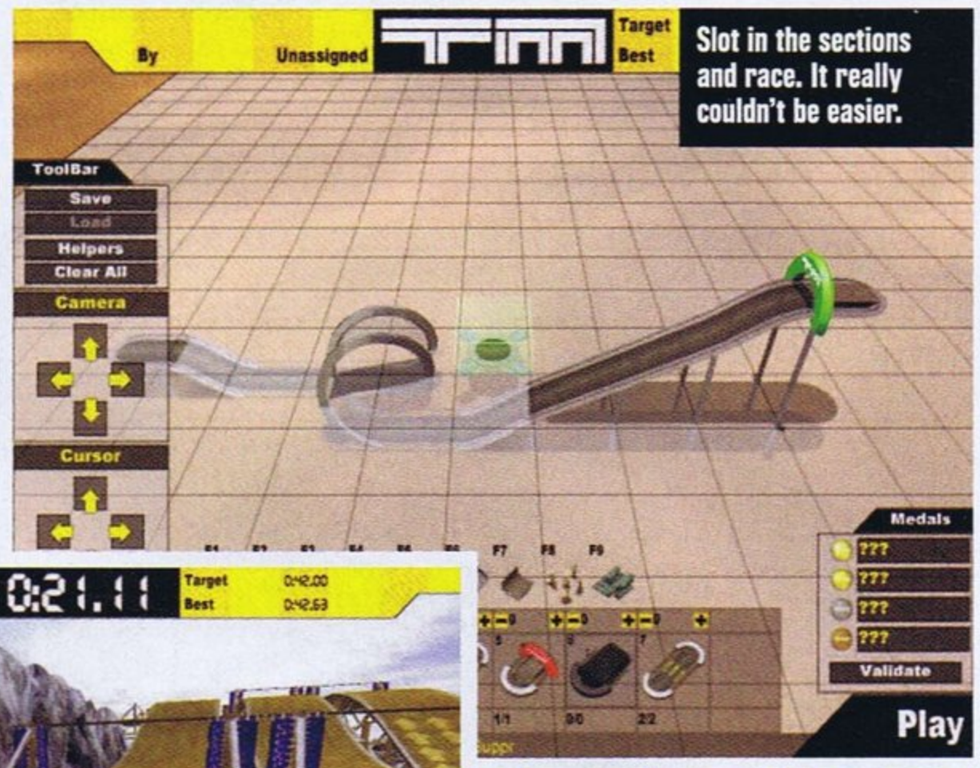
GENRE: ARCADE RACING

TRACKMANIA

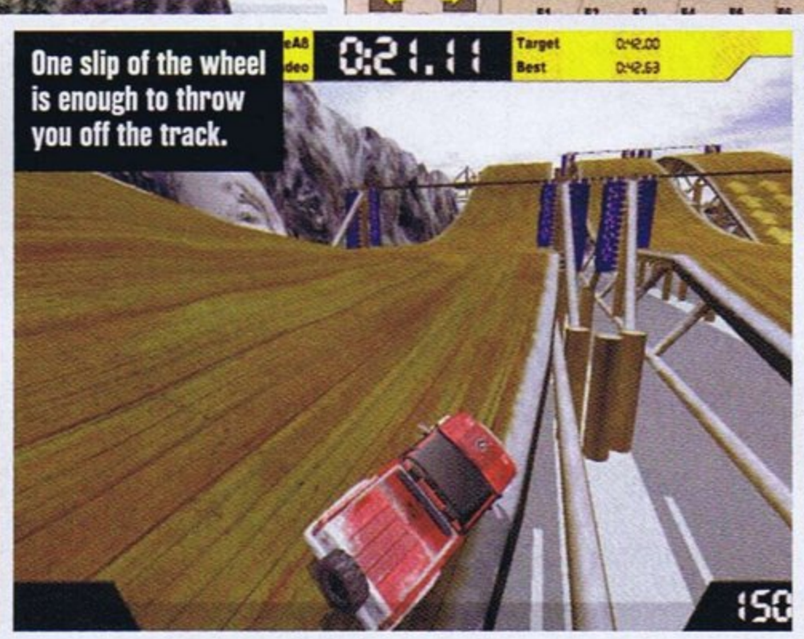
Bored with all those formulaic racing games? It's time to make tracks.



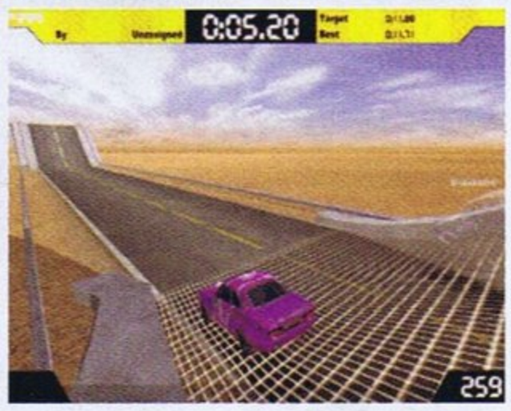
TrackMania gives you the chance to race on your own twisted tracks.



Slot in the sections and race. It really couldn't be easier.



One slip of the wheel is enough to throw you off the track.



Attracktive

GATHER AROUND

There are the usual LAN and Internet lobby games available in *TrackMania*. It can be fun to vanquish the foreigners, as games can be searched for via country if you prefer. However, the best multi-player mode is the 'Hot Seat'. Gather everyone around the keyboard and race. The one with the worst time can be publicly humiliated. It's a quickrace that works perfectly as a party game.

PCGA PROFILE

TrackMania is:
- Great fun
- Innovative
- Worth a look

TrackMania is not:
- Too complex
- Slow
- Number one

IF you haven't at least considered buying *TrackMania* after reading this review then I won't have done my job. You see, I know I'm fighting a losing battle with this one. It's a great little game, but no matter what I say, the chances of it denting the charts are miniscule. Its qualities ring out and I'm sure if they could only have shoehorned in Harry Potter somehow it would sell bucketloads. But, tragically, a niche game is going to struggle at this time of year.

It's 80% genius, 20% flawed. It feels like an indie game, polished to a shine. You create labyrinthine tracks, you race on them. *Bridge Construction Set* crossed with *Dukes of Hazzard*. It breaks down into three sections, the most fun of these being the puzzle section, where you're given a limited number of track sections, a start point, an end point, and a few pointers in between. It's up to you to lay the rest of the track to get from A to B. It doesn't sound hard, but it can be a real mind-bender. The fun comes in the experimenting: a small flat of road here, a ramp there. Get it wrong and the effects can be disastrously entertaining when you come to race on your track. Get it right and the cheesy grins will spread.

There's also a race mode that gives you dozens of pre-made tracks to skeet about in. This is where your driving skill counts. The wonderfully bouncy cars feel like they have balloons tied to the back, and the simplified controls are pure arcade. Most of the time the tracks will

"Hands-on fun with some genuine innovation."

conspire to throw you completely off balance, with lumps, bumps, holes and angled sidings to the roads. It's a constant fight against wobbly physics and inertia. It's also stupidly great fun and the best bit of the game to just pick up and play.

The track construction element is both inspired and flawed. It's such a good idea, yet they expect you to grope blindly along with little in the way of a tutorial. The manual should come in handy, but it's all over the place in terms of layout. Rough edges like this really show the difference between this and a game with a massive budget; but sadly it's the lack of polish that nibbles away at your enjoyment. The in-game interface doesn't help much either, it's mostly up to you to figure out what the hell's going on.

When you do, however, *TrackMania* is more fun than you can easily imagine. You buy track sections with points gained in the single-player races, so it's a good idea to get a few medals under your belt early on. Setting up a simple loop with a speed booster and start and finish point is all you'll need to get creative. There's an immense sense of satisfaction to be had here, and once you get going it's dangerously addictive.

TrackMania's a small game that mostly does what it sets out to do. Nothing too complex, but highly playable. It's hands-on fun with some genuine innovation. Now buy it and make me happy.

CRAIG PEARSON

■ Publisher **Digital Jesters** ■ Developer **Nadeo** ■ Minimum System **PII 450, 64Mb RAM, 32Mb 3D card**
■ Recommended **P4 1GHz, 128Mb RAM, 32Mb 3D card** ■ Multi-Player **LAN, internet, up to ten players**
■ Web Address **www.trackmania.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Bridge Construction Set
Rather more engineering than racing, but a great game all the same.

NFS: Underground
Proper racing, this, with a strong arcade dimension. No building at all.

PC GAMES addict

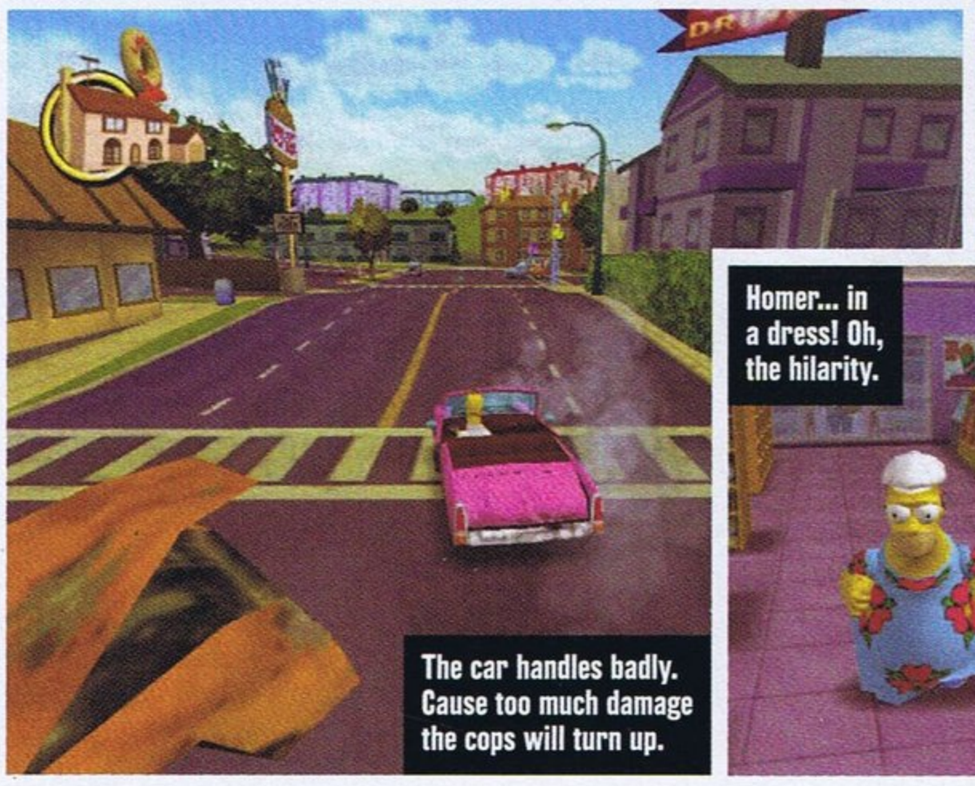
If you're looking for something different and racey, then have a look.

80%

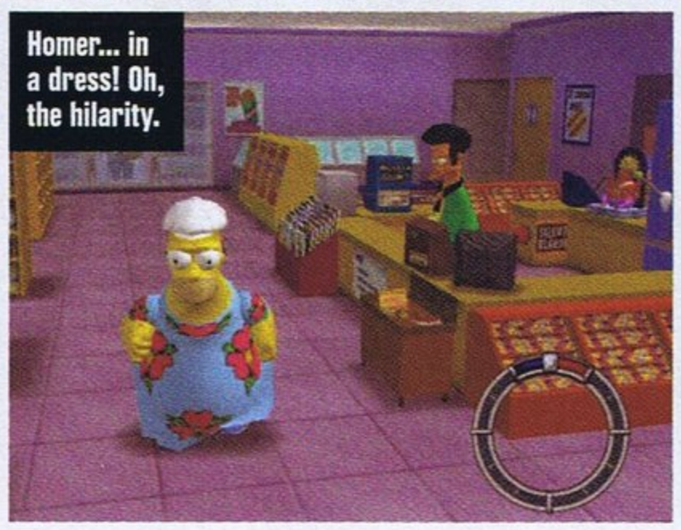
GENRE: ACTION ADVENTURE

THE SIMPSONS HIT & RUN

And now, a result not in the pools... Captain Cash-In: One. The Gaming Public: Nil.



The car handles badly. Cause too much damage the cops will turn up.



Homer... in a dress! Oh, the hilarity.

Homer is guided round town by a series of arrows and flashing things.

Burlesque

GTA *3*, this ain't. The similarities in terms of driving around a town and getting out to perform tasks might be there – hell, the cutaway camera for jumps and garages full of different vehicles are present, too. And looking closer, even buying new outfits for your avatar Homer is an option. You can see how this *should* work and how it *should* be fun – a *Grand Theft Auto*-style experience but in the whacked-out cartoon world of Springfield. Sad to say, *Hit & Run* is a lifeless husk. An imitation, a mockery of what could have been.

Cheer up! It's not all bad, y'know: there are literally minutes of fun to be had hurtling around town in the Simpsons' pink family-wagon, mowing down pedestrians and being pursued by cops. "I am evil Homer!" sings your witless character, like the puppet of financial and societal pressures that he is. There's at least half a gag in there.

For the most part, *The Simpsons: Hit & Run* is lovely to look at. Yet the familiar characters and voices are mere replicas, drained of all the ironic energy of the animated series. If there is one casualty in this road accident, it's Fun, that elusive gentleman who seems to pop up in the strangest of places. An anonymous corporate van has knocked Mr Fun down on its way to the bank, and he's bleeding to death before your very eyes.

"He's had it. Mr Fun is dying in my arms."

Can the various round-town races help him? Can the flow of precious red fluid be stemmed by the automated 'gags' that Homer can set off across Springfield? Will his heart be set beating once more by collecting coins or knocking down lampposts? Will death be distracted by the desperately contrived attempts at mission-based goofiness? Can we really fool him back to life with another tired Simpsons catchphrase? Another joke that we've already seen so many times on TV? Can Mr Fun live once again as Homer collects various vehicles to defeat the more challenging missions in the game?

No, he's had it. Mr Fun is dying in my arms. The senseless story, broken missions and ludicrous repetition have sapped his will to fight. There's nothing I can do but walk away from the scene, cursing the ugly futility of my existence.

On my way home from collecting the *Hit & Run* disc from the knowingly smiling Ross, walking alone in the nighttime darkness, I encountered a deranged man. He was exceptionally frightening. He drew close to me and said: "It's a joke. A f***ing cruel joke." At the time I was bewildered, but now... well, now I think I know what he was talking about.

JIM ROSSIGNOL

COVERED IN BEES!

Well they're wasps actually, but the Eddie Izzard reference was funny that way. All around town is the ultimate menace which Homer must unwittingly defeat – the wasp cameras. Kicking them brings a shower of coins, the currency with which Homer can repair his car, or buy new vehicles to complete the various missions.

PCGA PROFILE

Hit & Run is:
- **Driving**
- **Running**
- **Jumping**

Hit & Run is not:
- ***Midtown Madness***
- ***GTA***
- **Acceptable**

■ Publisher **Vivendi Universal** ■ Developer **Radical** ■ Minimum System **PIII 800, 128Mb RAM, 64Mb 3D card**
■ Recommended **1GHz, 256Mb RAM** ■ Multi-Player **None**
■ Web Address **www.thesimpsons-hitandrun.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Midtown Madness 2
Superb racing and brilliant automotive challenges. Unmissable multiplayer.

GTA: Vice City
The best at cars, the best at violence. A game that you can't afford to be without.

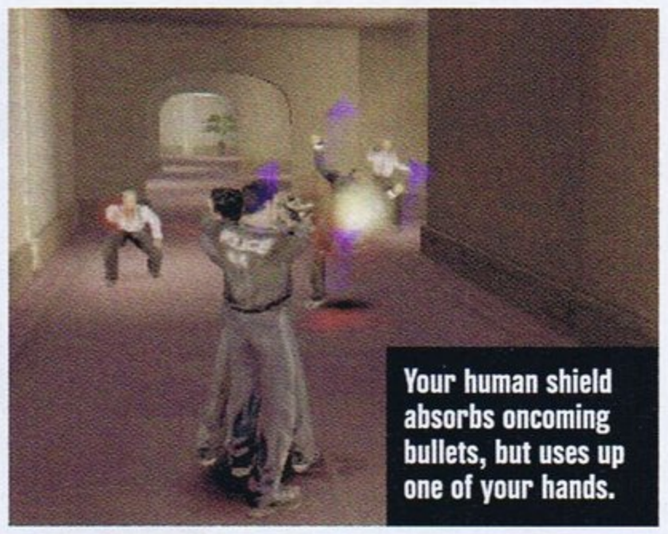
PC GAMES addict
This game is animated by a sinister force. There is nothing here for you.

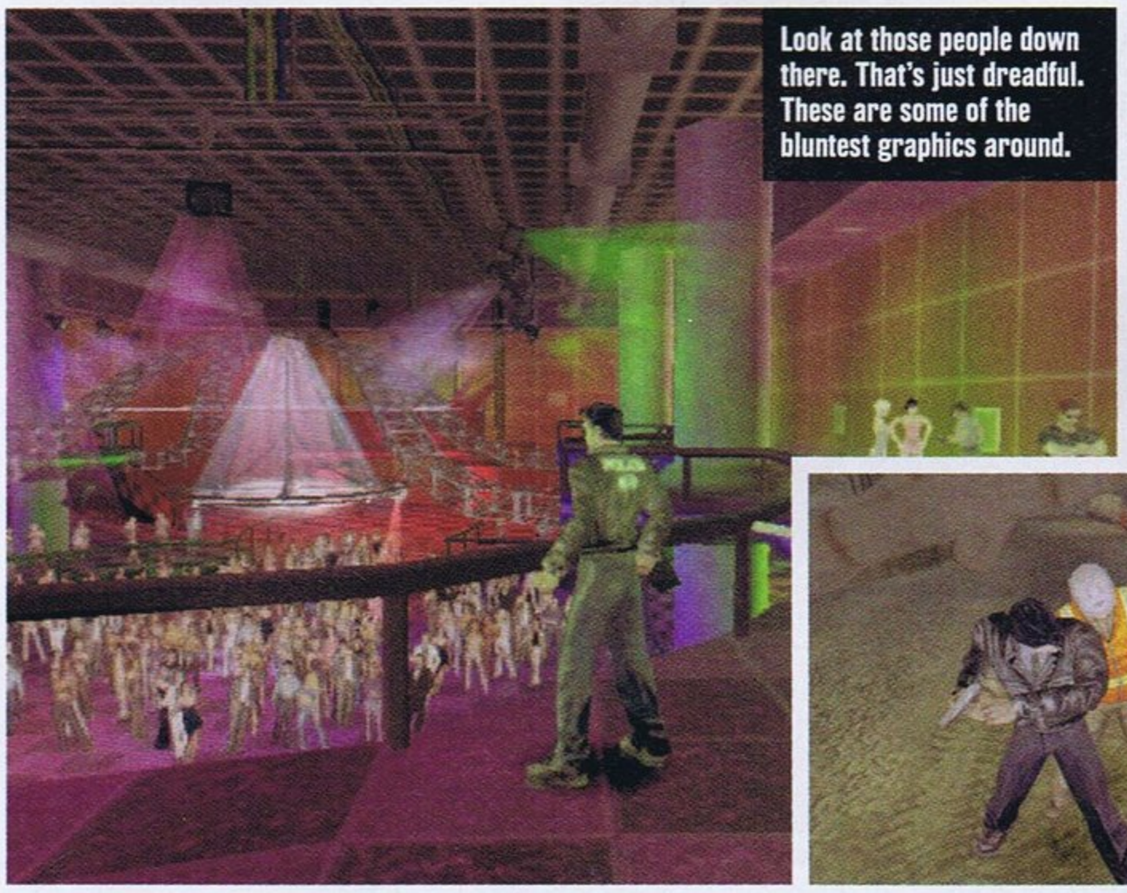
45%

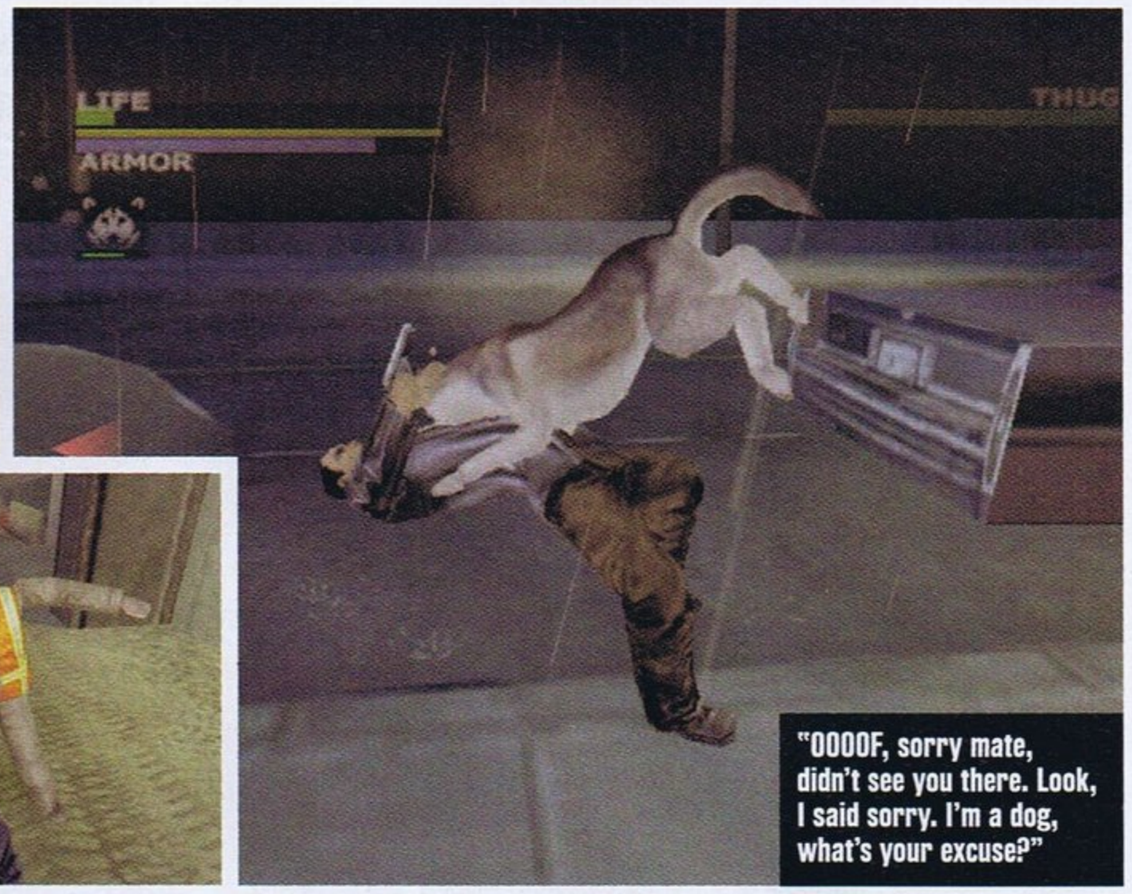
GENRE: THIRD-PERSON ACTION

DEAD TO RIGHTS

A straight-to-video videogame. Not good.


Your human shield absorbs oncoming bullets, but uses up one of your hands.


Look at those people down there. That's just dreadful. These are some of the bluntest graphics around.



"OOOOF, sorry mate, didn't see you there. Look, I said sorry. I'm a dog, what's your excuse?"

ONE MAN AND HIS KILLER DOG

When you get bored, you can put your gun away and call on your faithful sidekick Shadow to do the killing for you. He'll even retrieve their weapons, and bring them to you. And they're not covered in hot drool; bloody good doggie.

PCGA PROFILE

Dead To Rights is:
- Aiming at its own foot
- Guns made funless
- Steven Seagal

Dead To Rights is not:
- Good.
- An intense crime-busting orgasm
- Disturbing *Max Payne*'s already-fitful sleep

Gunishment

POOR old John Woo, eh? "The man who made holding two guns famous" it'll say on his grave – in bullet holes probably. It's like being remembered for having a stutter. His films contained some dazzling ballistic ballet – the Hollywood equivalent of being able to play the piano with your eyelashes – and when videogames blatantly copied (sorry, encompassed) his movies, they usually did it so ineffectually that the only thing people ever remember is the double-gun and slow-mo thing. Shame, really. Which, sadly, gets us here: *Dead To Rights* isn't very good.

It's the kind of game that fits all too snugly and self-consciously into the hard-boiled action category. It was supposed to be *Max Payne* but more interesting: leaping through the air, using the invisible jelly of bullet time to blow away reams of goons as though they were a grown-up, sentient coconut shy. And you should have been able to enjoy the added aspects of being able to disarm foes, going toe-to-toe, *and* commanding an attack dog. But the reality is something that would struggle to get airtime in a pre-*Max Payne* world, let alone in today's beautiful landscape of action games.

It's trigger happy, sure, and the sections where you get to just run about and shoot lots and lots of people are

"It's too patchy, too lumpen and too late."

bearable, even if they feel as rewarding as standing in the middle of the road. Here it feels a little like a lightgun game, such as *Time Crisis*: baddies spool from every alleyway, and you've got to pop them with a few forgetful caps. Which, like we said, is all right as brainless entertainment goes, but the lacklustre nature of the action is made all the worse by the terribly stuttered flow of play.

They've tried to pack in too many mini-games instead of focusing on making the gun-'n'-run meat of it any fun. Take the Jail section, for instance; if you're not embarking on a quest to put yourself to sleep with some one-note fist-fighting, you're hitting punch bags like a poor man's rhythm action game.

It's too patchy, too lumpen and too late, with the kind of looks that you'd expect from a game that's already been on the shelf for a few years. And it kind of has, since *DTR* is an Xbox conversion. It may just be a pre-emptive strike on PC owners waiting for *Half-Life 2*.

There are some good intentions here, of making a bullet-to-the-balls third-person shooter with a bit more texture than most, but the result has been cursed by a kind of negative synergy, leaving it duller than the sum of its parts. *DTR* tried to be all hard-boiled, ended up over-egged and just too runny in the middle. And did we mention anything about the storyline and characters? No wonder.

STEVE BAILEY

■ Publisher **LSP** ■ Developer **Namco** ■ Minimum System **PIII 500, 128Mb RAM, 600 Mb HD space, 16Mb 3D card** ■ Recommended **PIII 1Ghz, 256Mb RAM, 32Mb 3D card** ■ Multi-Player **No**
■ Web Address **www.deadtorights.com** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Max Payne 2
The sneering prince of heavy gunplay returns to collect his head count.

Max Payne
Even this one still packs more wallop than *DTR*. Repetitive, sure, but in a good way.

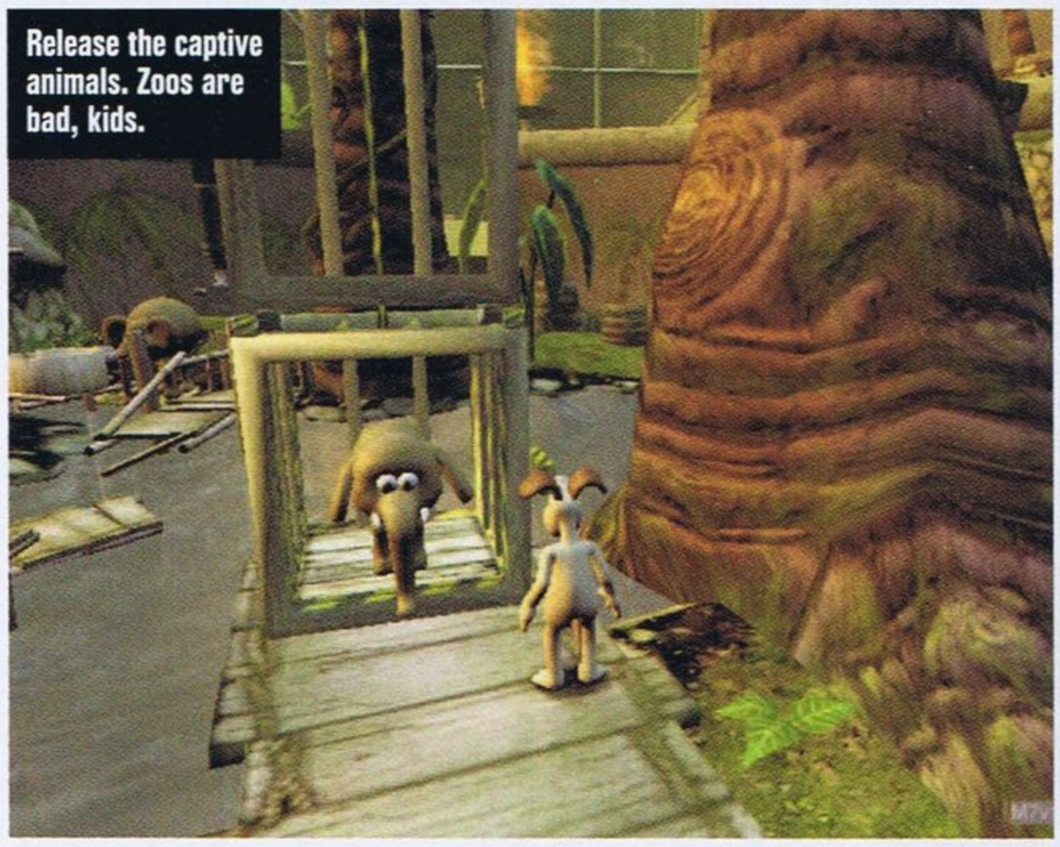
PC GAMES addict
A sadly outmoded, undemanding shooter without the calibre to hit any of its targets.

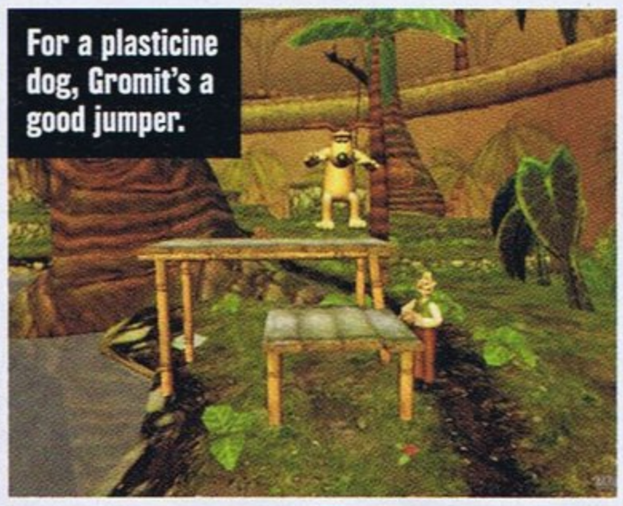
40%

WALLACE & GROMIT IN PROJECT ZOO

"Cheesed off, Gromit?" You will be.

■ Publisher **Bam! Entertainment** ■ Developer **Frontier Developments**


Release the captive animals. Zoos are bad, kids.


For a plasticine dog, Gromit's a good jumper.

Spot-on visuals are the game's main appeal.

WE'RE surprised it's taken Wallace and Gromit so long to take their bow on PC. It's probably because no one believed such a merry pair would cut any ice with PC gamers wrapped up in worlds of death, misery and brown.

More surprising still, *Project Zoo* comes courtesy of David *'Elite'* Braben's Frontier Developments team. Given the creator's credentials, we'd have been delighted to see the adventures of the Plasticine pair crammed into an open-ended space sim. Sadly, it wasn't to be. Instead *Project Zoo* is standard 3D platform fare, the like of which you've seen hundreds of times before. And, sad to report, the platform game as envisioned by Braben isn't even very good.

Which comes as a bit of a shock, as all seems well at the zoo gates. New Aardman-sculpted sequences set the scene beautifully and even Peter 'Wallace' Sallis lends his distinctive voice to the proceedings. The crisp graphics don't ring any alarm bells either. They lend the densely designed levels such a sheen of cartoony promise that you can't wait to delve deeper into the zoo's nooks and crannies.

But as soon as you trot into the fray, the main enemy appears – or rather disappears behind a wall. This time it's not Feathers McGraw or his evil henchmen that blight your every step, it's the truly abominable camera and atrociously designed controls. Because the viewpoint is completely independent from character movement, negotiating the platforms is a hugely frustrating experience. What's more, most of the gameplay takes place on the vertical plane, so you're constantly climbing ladders or inching your way up ropes. One slip, and you plummet right back to the start of your arduous task.

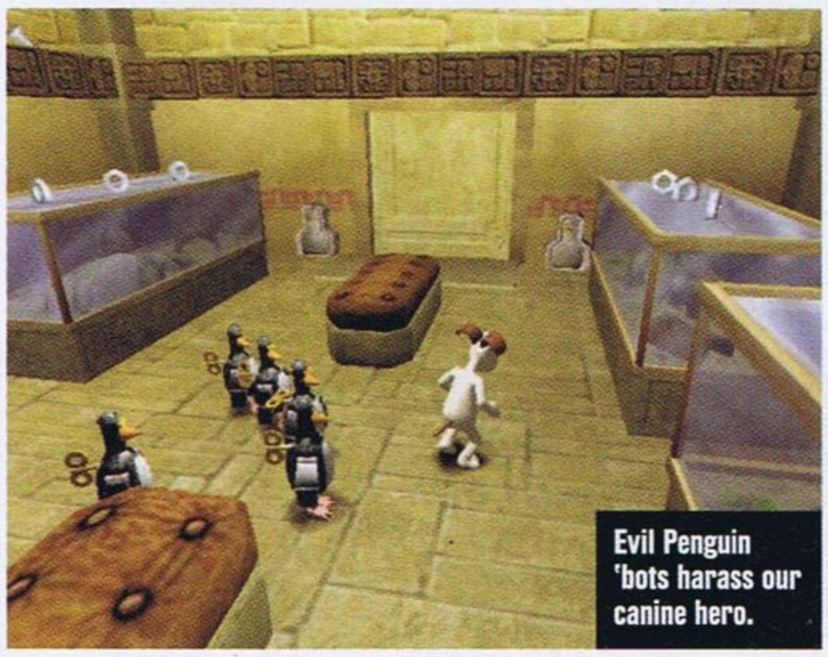
"The awkward controls will ensure plenty of birthday tears..."

Perhaps the bamboozling game mechanics and design were deliberately employed to smokescreen the brief lifespan of the game, which delivers around six hours of play. If so, it'll also ensure plenty of birthday tears when youngsters fiddle futilely against the awkward controls.

Project Zoo is a curious animal with questionable appeal. It's far too hard for the little ones while the Aardman animation stylings, lifespan and game genre won't exactly have the older hardcore gamers flocking in droves.

Wallace and Gromit don't seem to have much luck. This time the trousers may be right, but the game's gone wrong.

ROSS ATHERTON


Evil Penguin 'bots harass our canine hero.

PC GAMES addict

Good-looking licence that is blighted by ruinous camera and controls.

52%

YU-GI-OH! POWER OF CHAOS

■ Publisher **Konami**
■ Developer **In-house**

It's no secret that eastern culture is now influencing the west more pursuasively than much of our home-grown entertainment. Translated manga outsells Marvel's tentpole superheroics; movies such as *Spirited Away* make a critical impact; and children's TV is awash with hyper-kinetic 'toons from *Dragonball Z* to, yes, *Pokemon*.

Like so many Japanese cartoons, *Yu-Gi-Oh!* attacked playgrounds as a card game as well as an animation, but its esoteric and arcane rules have yet to make a satisfactory videogame, mainly because they're so impenetrable to the newcomer. *Power of Chaos* fares better than most as it succeeds in being as transparent as possible, but nonetheless, if you're not a *Yu-Gi-Oh!* fan there's little to love here.

The aim of the game is to whittle your opponent's life down by causing damage, achieved by 'summoning' monsters from your hand to the table, where they can attack both enemy monsters and your opponent's store of life. It's as simple as that, really, and the actual mechanics of the game are similarly basic and easy to appreciate. A turn is divided into self-explanatory phases, spells and traps can also be played to hornswaggle enemy monsters, and the limits of the game are understandable (only five monsters on the table at a time, and so on). Thus, passage into *Yu-Gi-Oh!'s* arcane world is relatively painless.

It's the relationships between the hundreds of cards and the limitless possibilities and strategies of deck building that form the real meat here. On the one hand, it offers pleasing scope for tactics, on the other it's a huge barrier to enjoying the game if the characters and mythology behind it mean nothing to you. Ultimately, while this is certainly a competent card game simulation it's never really *exciting*, no matter what your interest in *Yu-Gi-Oh!* is.

JES BICKHAM

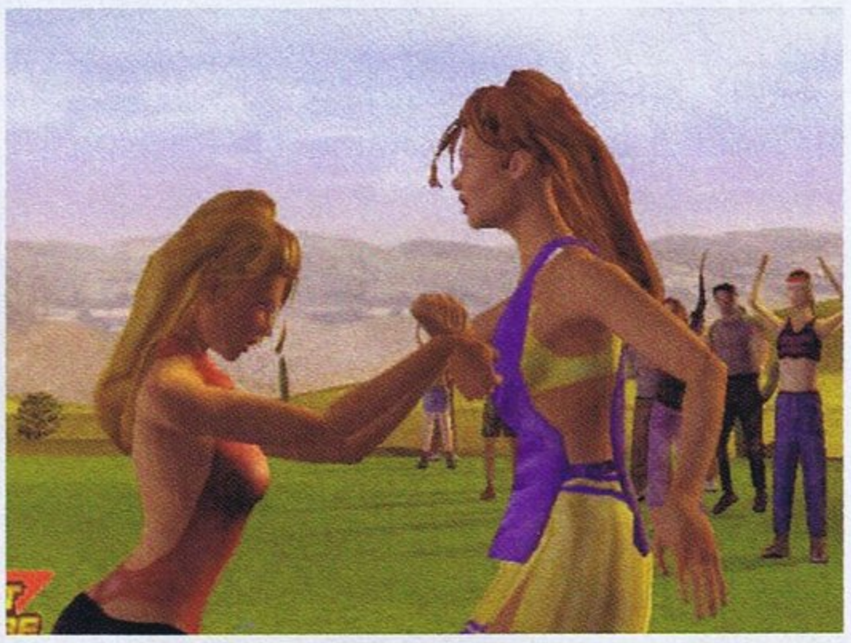
62%

GENRE: SPORTS

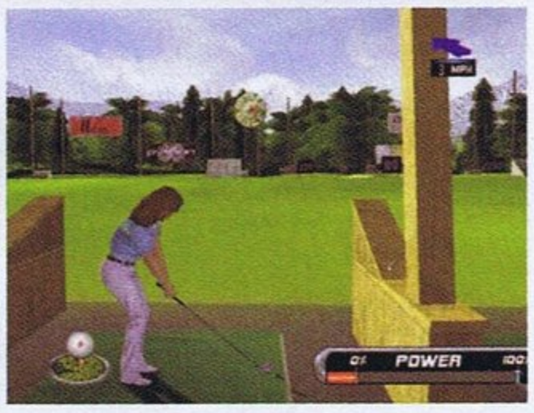
OUTLAW GOLF

You might as well try and sex-up bowls.

It's always good to see club members dressing sensibly for the hot summer weather.



The chipping is interrupted by the occasional girly cat-fight, as above.



HOLES IN THE WHOLE

Like so many games of this ilk, *Outlaw Golf* has tried to provide a huge amount of material and possible modes, as if that could somehow reduce the crippling rubbishness of the game itself. There are multiple mini-games and tests, the courses are hugely varied and detailed. All this is commendable and, in another golf game, might have made a refreshing change of pace. Not here.

PCGA PROFILE

Outlaw Golf is:
- Crass
- Grass
- Trash

Outlaw Golf is not:
- Tiger Woods
- Outlawed
- Sexed-up bowls

DOING recent interviews for a pro-gaming team we're forming, we spent a fair bit of time discussing television with the applicants. One of them said that he didn't see why there shouldn't be a bit of afternoon *Counter-Strike* on the TV. After all, he reasoned, look at lawn bowls.

Good point, I said. I don't watch bowls. But I might watch it, if there were ice hockey-style fights between the bowlers, or if those bowlers were armed with guns, or were tremendously beautiful human beings, dressed in tight clothing and gesturing provocatively. This is, presumably, very similar to the line of thought the creators of *Outlaw Golf* pursued in developing their game: sex-up golf, and your audience gets bigger.

Needless to say, such simplistic reasoning leads to predictable pratfalls. *Outlaw Golf* is rubbish. At its heart there's a fairly simple 'two-click power-bar' method of belting your indestructible golf-egg around the course. In principle this at least might have worked reasonably well, but in practice the frustration of working with the unpredictable physics engine means that you're likely to be throttling yourself with the mouse cord after playing just a couple of holes.

Not only that, but there's something called a 'composure' factor, which affects your accuracy in play. The worse you play, the worse your accuracy becomes and vice versa. The guidelines provided by the power bar become less and less realistic (not that they were much help to begin with) and your ball will end up curling off at the wildest angles. It's a slippery slope, and, ghastlier still, you lose composure for even the most minor of errors.

"You can beat up your caddy once per hole..."

Your loss of composure is counterbalanced by your ability to beat up your caddy once on each hole. Success in this ass-whupping increases composure, and therefore accuracy. Don't be fooled: there's nothing remotely interesting about this little side-game, and the 'attack' method is a single click at the right place on a power-up bar. Weak indeed.

Ultimately, the core concept of *Outlaw Golf* is what destroys the factors of fun. The composure gimmick is so feeble as to actually make the game worse. It's just not rewarding to play. Had this been a simpler arcade golf game, then the basic systems of ball-whacking might have been adequate enough to provide some hole-accruing fun. The developers would still have to do something about the disgustingly inaccurate putting, however, since playing against the computer at the putting stages is nigh-on impossible. Indeed, it makes my eyes water with indignation at the very thought of it.

While the 3D terrain and in-game animations are acceptable given what the game is trying to do, there's no getting away from the fact that somebody thought the cheesy commentary and appallingly clichéd characters were going to make the game in some way sexier, in some way appealing. They really don't – they simply drench the whole game in the sort of nauseating smarminess that some Americans seem to want to frame their entire entertainment industry with. It's an ugly business. Avoid.

JIM ROSSIGNOL

Clubbed

■ Publisher **Simon & Schuster** ■ Developer **Hypnotix** ■ Minimum System **PIII 500, 128Mb RAM, 3D card**
■ Recommended **1GHz CPU, 256Mb RAM, GeForce 3 or better** ■ Multi-Player **Up to four, hot seats**
■ Web Address **www.simonsays.com/ssimkt/outlawgolf** ■ Release Date **Out now**

ALSO WORTH A LOOK...

Tiger Woods PGA 2004
Still the best of the best for golf. Putt this way for victory.

Taking A Walk
Less frustrating, and unfettered by the restrictions of wealthy men in bad jumpers.

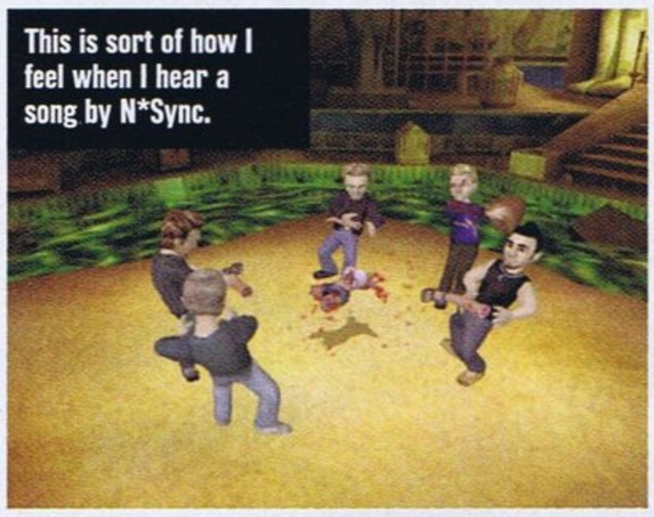
PC GAMES addict
Flawed from the outset, *Outlaw Golf* makes us want to lie down and die.

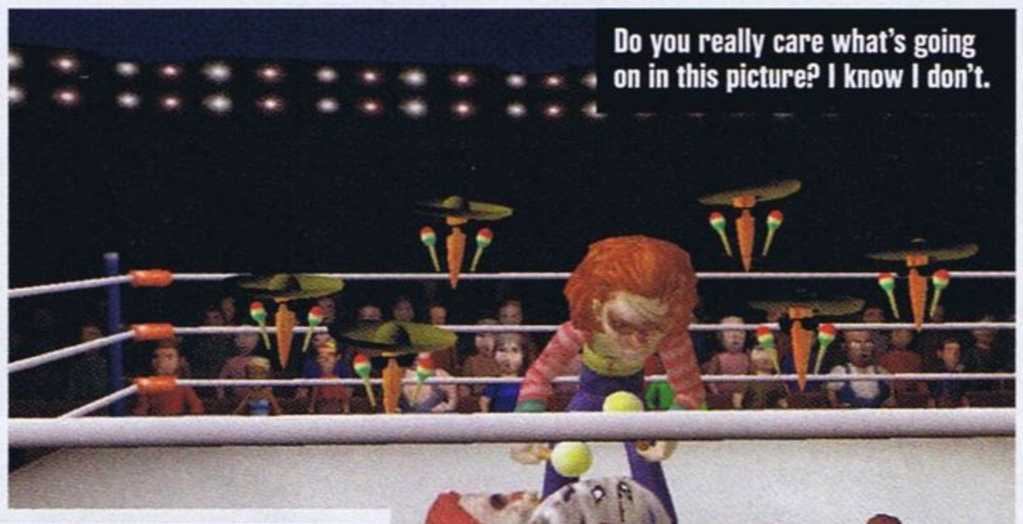
42%

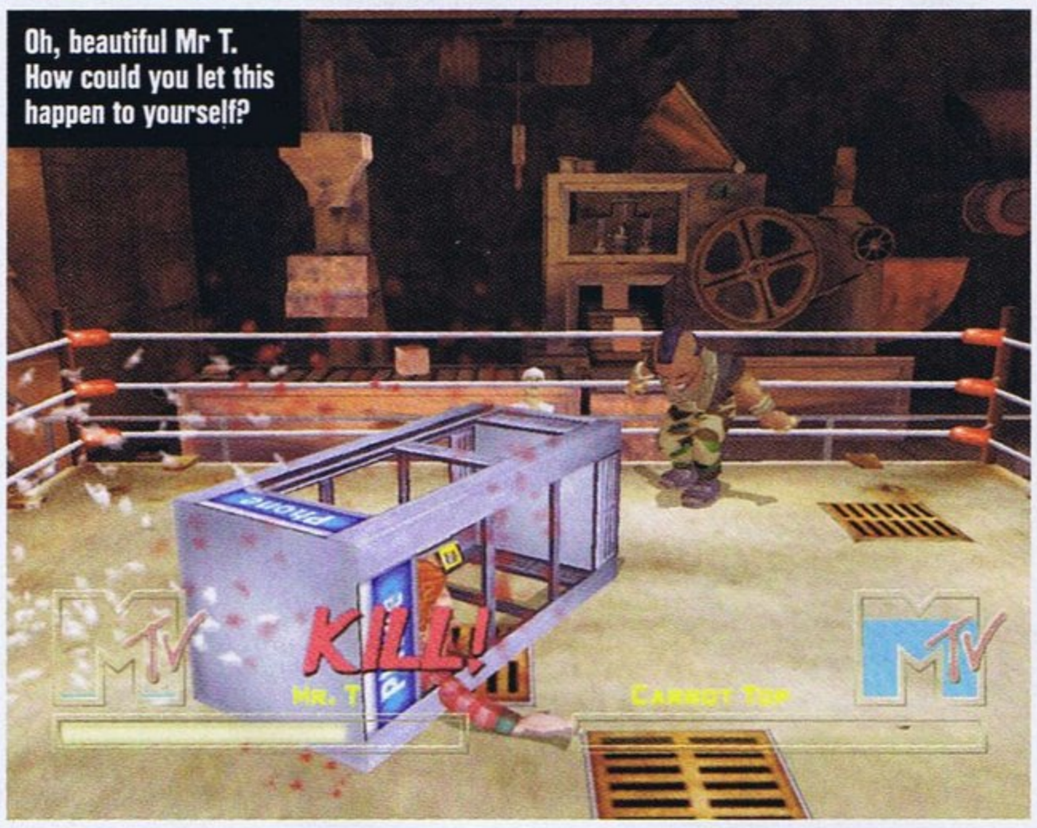
MTV CELEBRITY DEATHMATCH

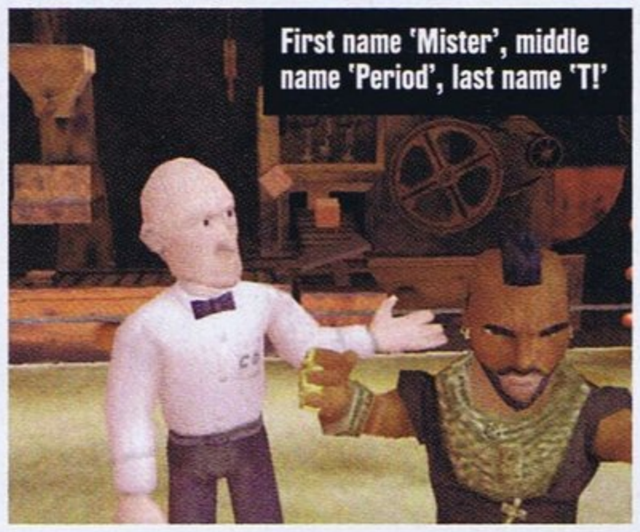
Mark Donald has girl's hair. There, that's more controversial than anything in this game.

■ Publisher **Take Two Interactive** ■ Developer **Big Ape Productions Inc**









FIGHTING games famously don't work on the PC, and *Celebrity Deathmatch* upholds that tradition. It's based on the old-hat MTV television series of the same name, which involved claymations of music and movie stars fighting in a comical fashion. You, naturally, take control of said claymations and make them fight. It's firmly in the PlayStation mould of arena-based beat-'em'-ups, and most especially *Mortal Kombat*, so each fight must be won by a fatal finishing move. It's the law.

All of which amounts to furious button-bashing intended to pull off certain attacks which are intended to be funny, and maybe even controversial – they're certainly very violent. Amazingly enough, none of them are either funny or controversial, and quickly become repetitive and irritating. Worse still, the single-player game can be completed in around two hours, and the extra characters you can win do nothing to revive this coma case of a game. A create-a-celebrity feature is included, but the funniest thing you can do is give Frankenstein an afro and purple skin.

Single bouts and a limited multiplayer mode are available, but really the game is so deeply flawed that it's like putting a coat on a corpse. Much of this stems from the crush of B-list celebrities included (Carrot Top, Cleo, Cindy Margolis or Paul Kirkpatrick, anyone?) and the sheer lack of comedy appeal among the rest (Carmen Electra, Shannen Doherty, Busta Rhymes). Even the appearance of cult stalwart Mr T fails to inject any fun in to the game. His finishing move is dropping the A-Team van on his opponent. What a waste. Meanwhile, porn star Ron Jeremy attacks people with a barrage of giant bananas and cockerels and Anna-Nicole Smith hits people with her gigantic melons. Oh, please stop – you're killing us.

"The game is so flawed it's like putting a coat on a corpse."

The graphics are hideously dated, and the inane and repetitive patter of the commentators only makes the whole experience more unbearable. Simply put, this game stinks. The fact that it's all over in an evening is more of a relief than anything else.

ALEC MEER

PC GAMES addict

Celebrities? Check. Death? Check. Worth the plastic it's printed on? Absolutely not.

11%

VIRTUAL SKIPPER 3

■ Publisher **Digital Jesters**
■ Developer **Nadeo**

These days, I have an unfortunately impatient attitude to games. My time is limited; my hours rigorously divided between work, sleep, loafing and the pub. A game must grab me like a clever fisherman hooks a juicy trout, gripping me with tension, perfectly scaled challenge and deep involvement.

Oddly, *Virtual Skipper 3* does none of these things. If you've never set foot on a boat in your life, there's nothing to ease your introduction to things maritime, with a complex interface babbling on about Velocity Made Good, and an erratic difficulty setting. If, like me, you're quite competent at mixing a G&T in a Force 5, the simulation seems slightly pointless – a mild diversion at best – lacking the fresh air, slight danger and teamwork of yacht racing, not to mention the relaxation of cruising. But there is something – and I suspect it might be the largely elegant presentation – that keeps me coming back for more.

The various game modes include pre-set challenges based around the six locations which are designed to teach you specific things about the behaviour of the four boats – although there's precious little in-game advice as to points of sail or sail changes, making it all the more incomprehensible to landlubbers. The race series themselves are a little lightweight too – would it have been that much effort to include loads more races and AI racers? Indeed, you're shown just how easy it would have been, as a well-equipped editor gives the ability to create your own challenges and even your own islands and coastlines to race around.

At full price, and with few real advances over 2003's *Virtual Skipper 2*, *Virtual Skipper 3* has plenty going against it. Mind you, anyone rich enough to enjoy yachting probably won't be put off by such things.

ROSS ATHERTON

62%

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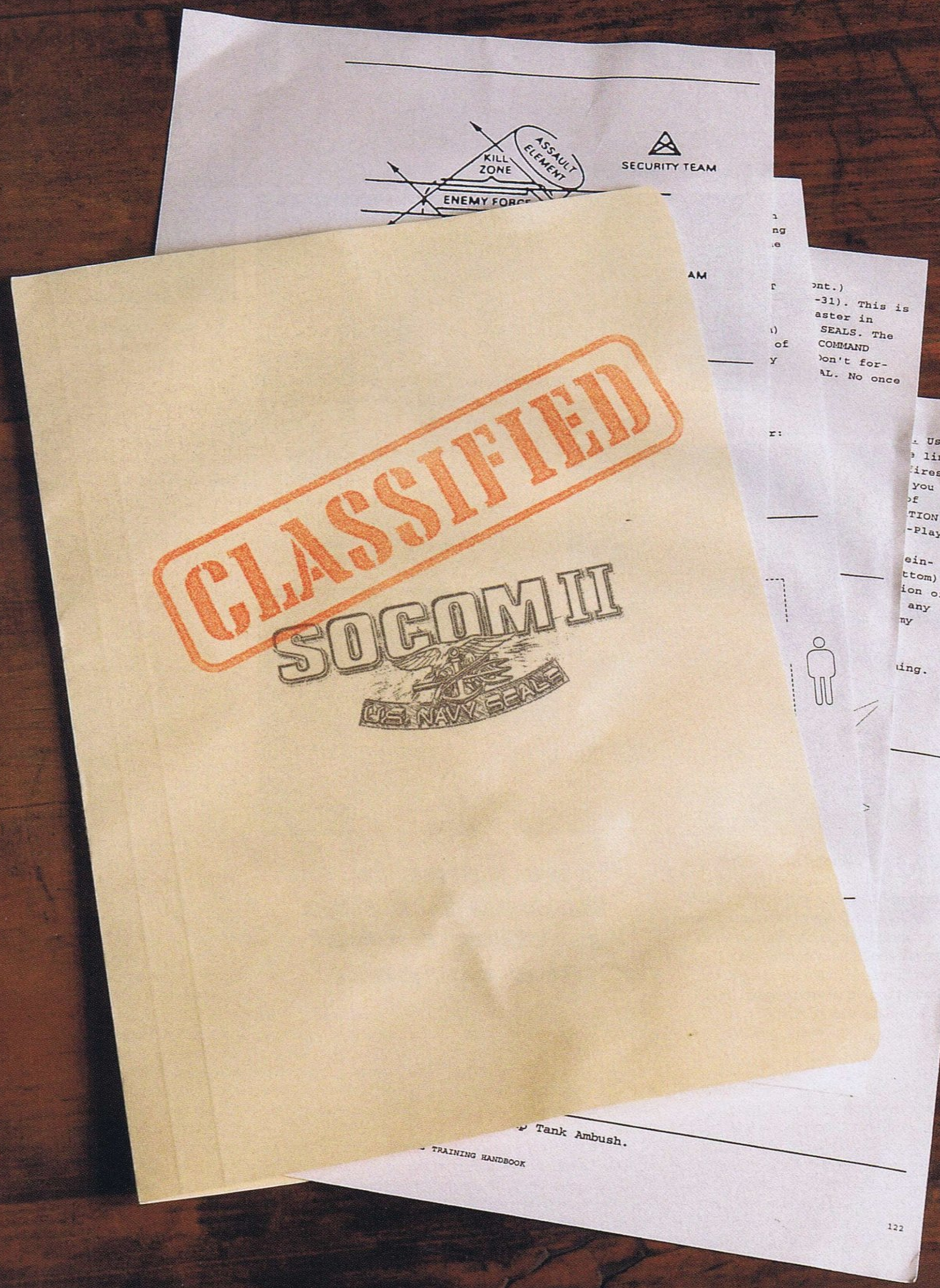

COMING IN MARCH 2004.

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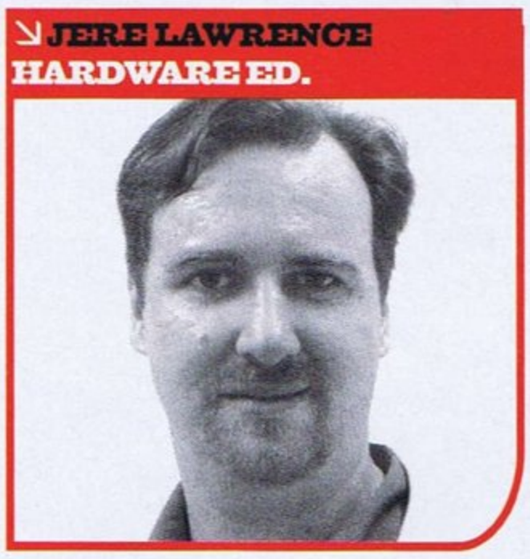
Hardware

Gear/Gadgets/Apps/Utilities Definitive reviews



OH GAMING PERIPHERALS, WHERE ART THOU?

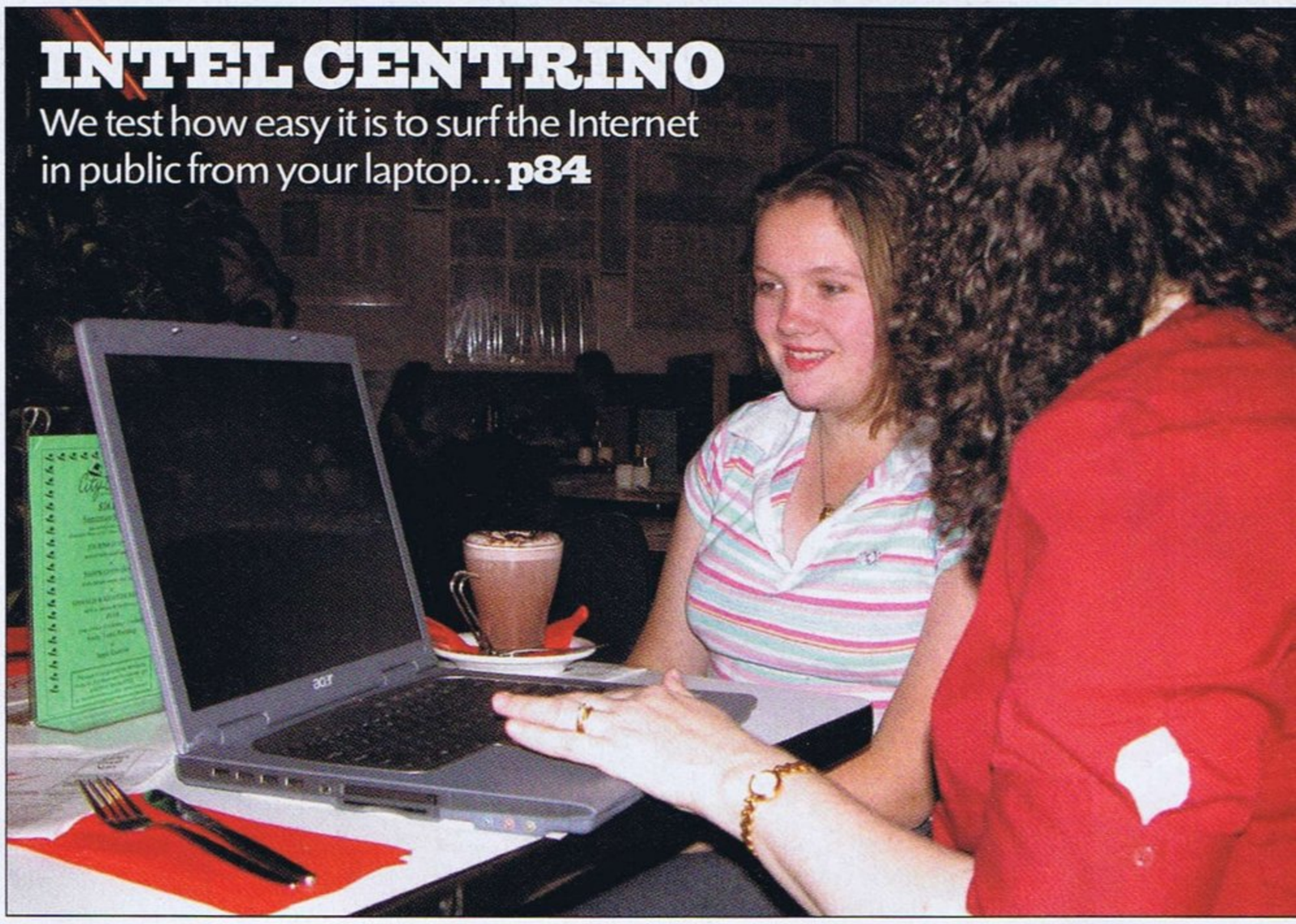
One of the great joys of being a PC gamer, in days of old that is, was the abundance of gaming peripherals available. Joysticks, 3D cyberballs, Mercury switch headsets, steering wheels, throttles and other items were available to bring the best out of our games, although admittedly the cyberball was a bit of a joke.

That time though has definitely come to an end. We still have companies like Logitech producing joysticks and steering wheels but there's no doubting they're standing firm among a rapidly shrinking crowd. Even Microsoft, producers of the excellent Sidewinder range of joysticks and steering wheels announced in June this year that the product line is no more.

These were discontinued due to long-term declines in sales but, adds Microsoft "This move is allowing Microsoft to focus additional resources on the growing mouse and keyboard categories, as well as developing future input devices which will further enhance users' software experiences."

On the subject of Microsoft, especially with talk of Longhorn (the next version of Windows) and Xbox 2 compatibility there's the possibility that at least between the two systems that device sharing is on the table. Let's hope it is because as much as I like and appreciate the little rodent that makes first-person shooting games so enjoyable there's no denying the extra immersion a joystick or steering wheel brings to a game. They say variety is the spice of life and in regard to gaming hardware let's hope it doesn't all get very bland.

Jere Lawrence
Hardware Editor



INTEL CENTRINO

We test how easy it is to surf the Internet in public from your laptop... **p84**

86

Asus SK8V AMD FX
A totally psychedelically coloured motherboard, maaan!

90

USB Bluetooth Dongle
Plug this into your PC and you're fully Bluetoothed up instantly.

92

Zippy EL-715 Keyboard
An illuminated keyboard to give you that uplit supervillian look.

MSI MEGA STICK 1

MP3 player, radio, dictaphone, storage device, bread slicer – this stick really is mega!... **p87**

Proving their dedication to portability, Intel are refining the role of the laptop.

INTEL CENTRINO

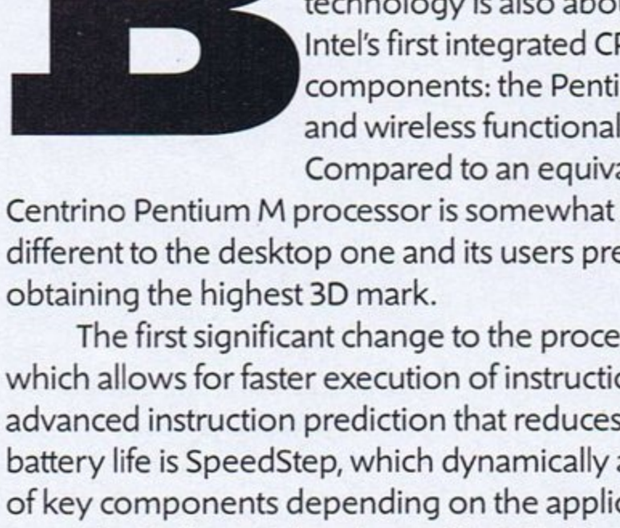
By far the most prominently marketed aspect of Centrino is the wireless communication, which we'll get to, but the technology is also about chip refinement. Representing Intel's first integrated CPU, Centrino consists of three components: the Pentium M processor, the I855 chipset and wireless functionality with on-Die antenna.

Compared to an equivalent Pentium 4-M processor, the Centrino Pentium M processor is somewhat slower, but the laptop world is different to the desktop one and its users prefer longer battery life than obtaining the highest 3D mark.

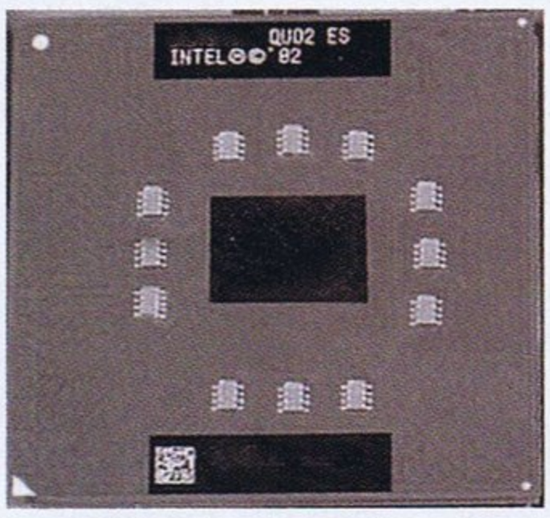
The first significant change to the processor is a dedicated stack manager which allows for faster execution of instructions at lower power, along with advanced instruction prediction that reduces "re-dos" or errors. Furthering battery life is SpeedStep, which dynamically adjusts the voltage and frequency of key components depending on the application and power required.

Next is the notebook-specific 855 chipset that supports up to 2GB of DDR266 memory, and USB2. The predominant aspect of this chipset, however, is the integration of Intel's own 3D solution, except it would appear that vendors prefer ATi's mobility Radeon series.

Many consider the Intel Pro/Wireless 2100 network connection to be the essence of Centrino. Ingeniously the antenna is integrated into the CPU – hence the name 'on-Die antenna' – and the way it works is a business, like a coffee shop or ISP invests in an 802.1 transceiver and places it strategically so customers can access the Internet. One such enabled business, called a Hotspot, is City Extra in Parramatta, Sydney, so we went there to check it out.



It didn't go too well. Arriving at the café, our wireless device picked up nothing so the next obstacle was to find staff who knew about Centrino.



The manager understood what we were trying to do and whisked us to a booth directly under the ceiling-mounted transceiver where a strong signal was reported. The connection process is quite ingenious – once you are connected to the transceiver, attempting to open a web page will result in the ISP's page displaying a list of charges for time required.

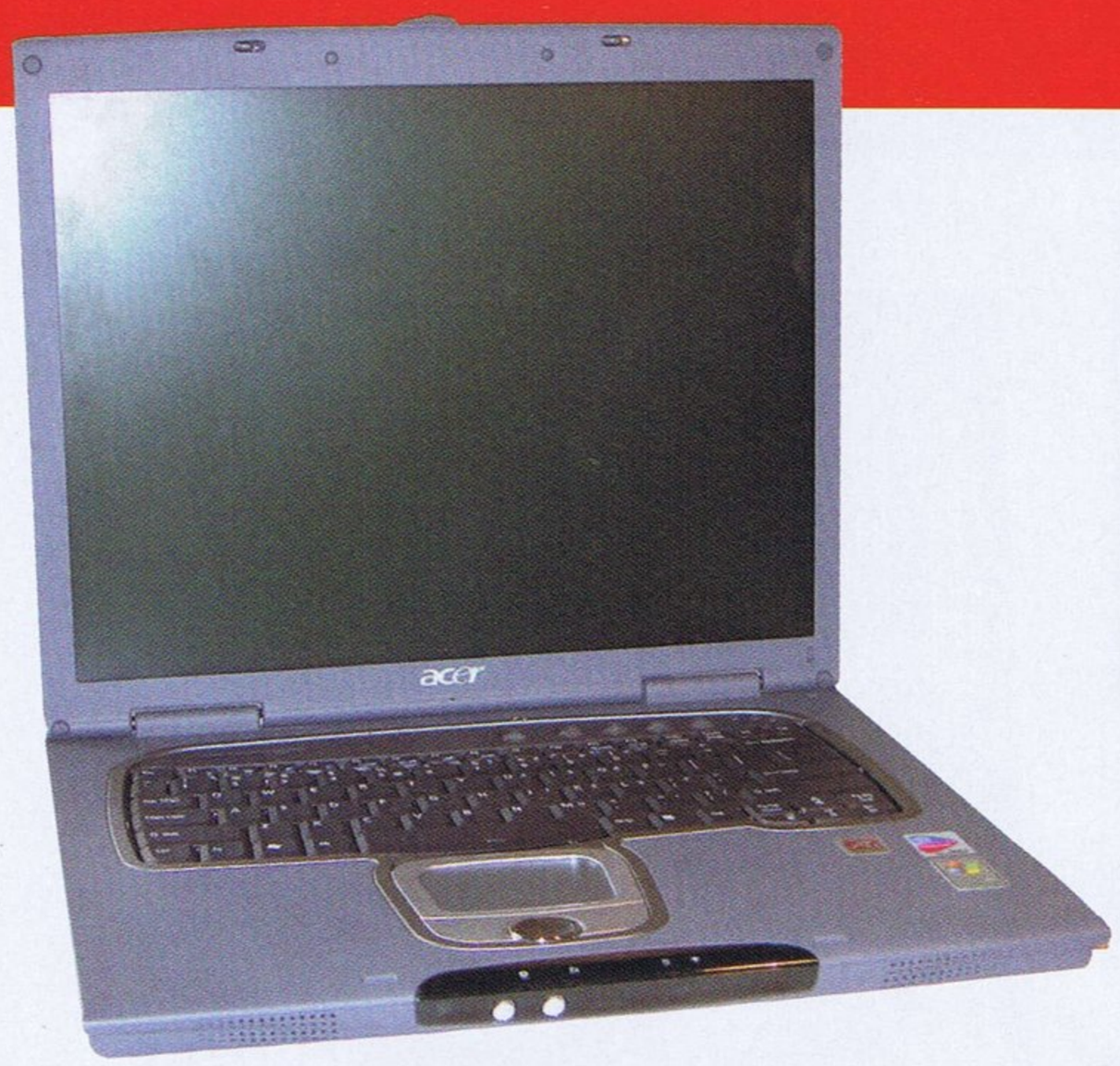
Typically, this stage – the one where they get your money – worked fine, but after credit card approval it all went downhill. Running at a ridiculously slow pace we managed to get Yahoo up in about 60 seconds and Google in around 40 – then we lost connection. These fluctuations continued for the rest of the night and we failed to receive any other web pages.

Not wanting to write the technology off, we tried again the next evening at City Extra and lo and behold, it all worked. Literally everything that Intel ever promised, the second session couldn't have gone any smoother and we were receiving web pages at the full speed of 11Mbit.

802.1 communications have a number of possible points of failure. Firstly, the frequencies of these airwaves are unregulated so anyone could set up a higher powered transceiver opposite an established Hotspot to "steal" or interfere with their customers. Worse, 802.1 home devices (such as a wireless router) can interfere with a Centrino hotspot – and if you thought ping attacks were bad, wait until the script-kiddies start interfering with Wi-Fi.

There's no denying that Centrino is a great chip and that Intel are definitely on the right track making wireless communications easily available but it all amounts to nought if it doesn't work. Other possible points of failure – restaurant staff that are either too busy or uninformed to be of help, and if it all goes belly-up it could be anything from the transceiver in the ceiling being faulty to outside interference or the wireless ISP having technical difficulties. This is technology to watch, because when it works it's fantastic, and it looks like all it really needs is a pocket-sized book that reviews and rates Hotspots.

Jere Lawrence



ACER TRAVELMATE 800

This review was written on the beach.

Okay, I lied; because about the only thing you would want to be doing on a day like today is to get in out of the rain. It is, however, a subtle reminder that notebooks are a great way to compute in the outdoors and the Acer Travelmate 800 is a fine example of Centrino technology.

A little larger than the LG offering, the Travelmate measures in at 330mm x 280mm x 32mm. Being Centrino enabled, the Travelmate uses a Pentium M processor and runs at 1.6GHz which isn't ideal for modern gaming. But then again, laptops never have been because they don't offer anywhere near the power output of a desktop system and battery life is a major consideration.

The 15" 1400x1050 screen is fairly decent but rather washed-out with uneven backlighting – obviously, LG, the masters of TFT offer a better screen. The screen is still very usable and maintains good proportions in all resolutions. A big plus is that the Travelmate can be upgraded with a DVD Reader/Burner, though the default configuration ships with a DVD Reader/CD-RW. At 40GB the HDD is perfectly sufficient for office applications and a number of games, and the four USB2 ports are well integrated on the side along with a mini IEEE1394 port. Acer quote an RRP of $4998 but there is a more realistic price out there of $3,995.

→Detail

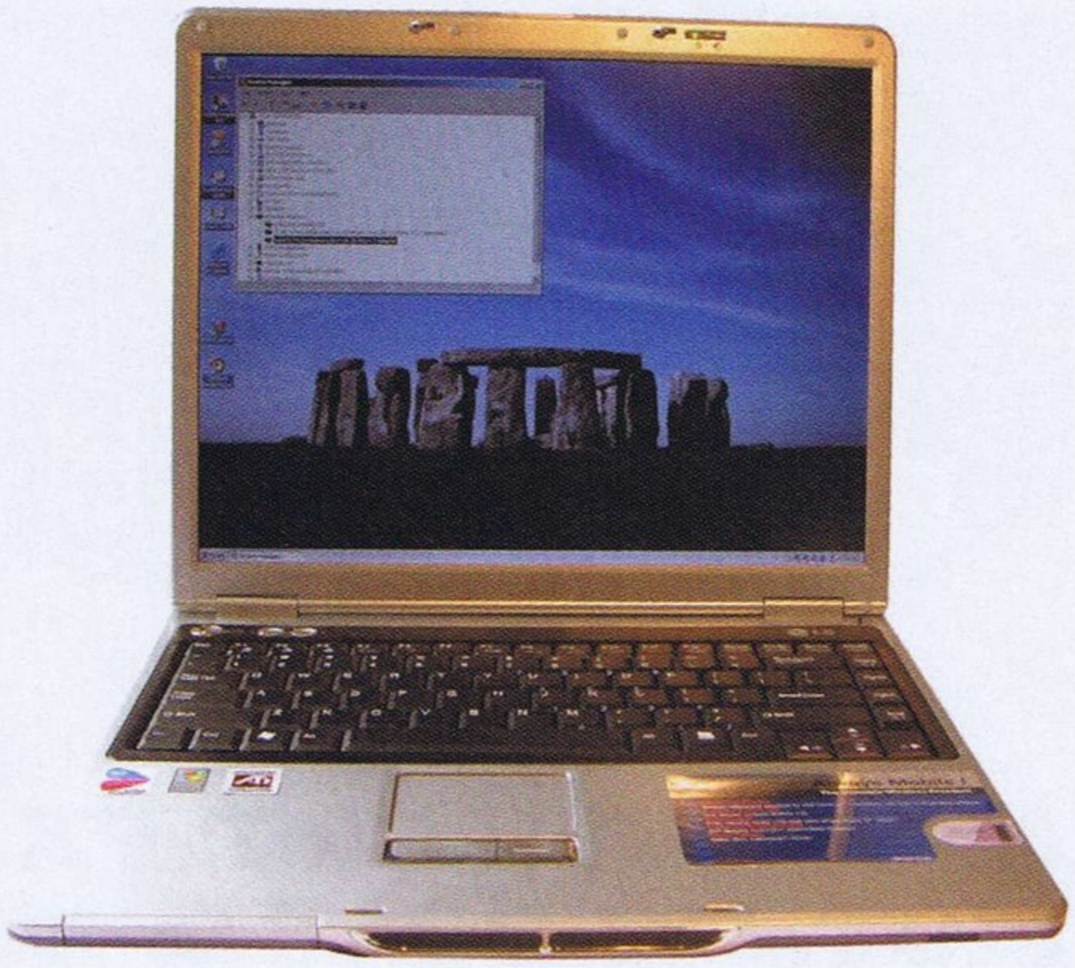
CPU: Intel Pentium M Processor at 1.6GHz with 1MB 2nd level cache on-Die
Memory: 256MB
Battery life: 8-10 hours
Graphics: ATi Mobility Radeon 9000
Screen: 15" LCD TFT Maximum resolution: 1400 x 1050
HDD: 40GB
Optical: DVD Reader/CD-RW
Modem: Internal 56k
LAN: 10/100 Ethernet
Wireless: Intel Pro/Wireless Mini LAN (Centrino) built into Pentium M
Audio: Headphone and speaker out, mic in
USB: 4 x USB2
Dimensions: 330mm (W) x 270mm (D) x 29.5mm (H)
Weight: 2.9kg with battery
OS: Microsoft Windows XP Professional
Price: $4,998
Distributor: Acer
Web: www.acer.com.au
Phone: (02) 8762 3000

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ A perfectly adequate laptop for a mobile office but only at the $3,995 price point
- ↙ Inferior video chipset, smaller HDD and less memory than the LG laptop

You will need to go bargain hunting for this laptop because the RRP is at a high price point. A Travelmate for $3,995 is reasonable but added competition in the laptop sector will most likely see this price come down, and for consumers it would be best to wait for this to happen.

75%



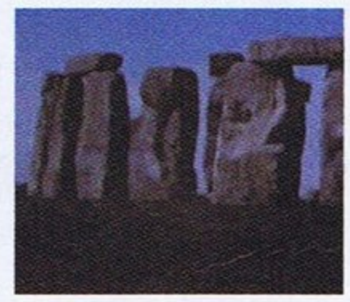
LG LM50-34GA

And now they're making laptops.

It's interesting to note in the rapid growth of LG that this burgeoning Korean company doesn't just copy technology, but are prepared to innovate. Their Internet fridge, for example I thought was (to use a painfully obvious pun) rather cool. And in regard to their laptop, innovation has come in the form of design. Incredibly thin, the laptop is more like an after-dinner mint than a computing device. It's only 25mm tall and weighs a paltry 2.4kg – and that's with the batteries in. We can confirm that you can get 10 hours of Internet usage out of them.

Utilising the new Pentium M processor (and thus the reason it's Centrino enabled) running at 1.6GHz the laptop can definitely tackle standard Microsoft Office applications but a faster CPU would be desirable for gaming. The graphics array, however, is quite impressive in that it features the Mobility Radeon 9600 which is blazingly fast for a laptop and can render DirectX 9 in hardware.

Not surprisingly, given LG's mastery of TFT technology, the screen is vibrantly colourful, with perfect edge-to-edge backlighting, incredibly fast refresh and looks great at any resolution besides its native resolution of 1400x1050. The unit also features a 60GB HDD, combo DVD reader/CD-RW and 512MB of memory. It is, however, priced in the Toshiba/IBM Thinkpad range which is a difficult market to penetrate. But that said, the LM50-34GA is definitely a player with a very bright future.



→Detail

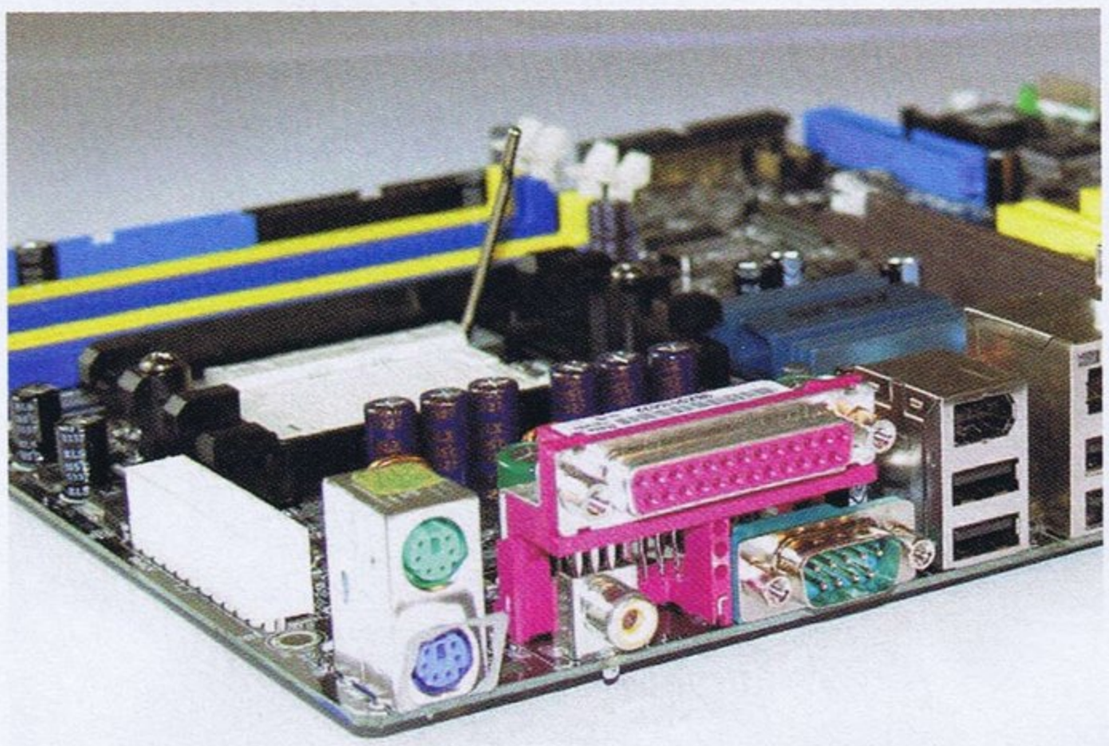
CPU: Intel Pentium M Processor at 1.6GHz with 1MB 2nd level cache on-Die
Memory: 512MB
Battery life: 8–10 hours
Graphics: ATi Mobility Radeon 9600
Screen: 15" LCD TFT
Maximum resolution: 1400x1050
HDD: 60GB
Optical: Combo DVD Reader/CD-RW
Modem: Internal 56k
LAN: 10/100 Ethernet
Wireless: Intel Pro/Wireless Mini LAN (Centrino) built into Pentium M
Audio: Headphone and speaker out, mic in
USB: 2 x USB2
Dimensions: 331mm (W) x 274mm (D) x 26.4mm (H)
Weight: 2.4kg with battery
OS: Microsoft Windows XP Home
Price: $4,495
Distributor: LG
Web: www.lge.com.au
Phone: 1800 643 156

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ An extremely attractive and light notebook that's well decked out at an awesome price
- ↙ Keyboard doesn't extend up for easier typing

The way to describe this laptop is 'desirable'. The weight, portability and screen quality is excellent. If you can find a stable Hotspot then this is the laptop to go café surfing with.

93%



ASUS SK8V AMD FX MOTHERBOARD

Another one of those wacky names involving a number '8' for us to guess the meaning of.

Though it has a similar name to another Asus 940 pin FX board – the SK8N – the SK8V is significantly different due to the chipset. While the SK8N was based on the nVIDIA nForce 3 chipset, the SK8V is based on Via's K8T800 chipset, which to translate the designator primarily indicates an 800MHz, Hyper Transport (shared) scalable system bus (an FSB that can complete multiple operations at once).

Important to some people, the motherboard's PCB is impressively black with bright contrasting colours to identify PCI slots and colour-coded ports to represent the Dual Channel banks. Colours might not seem a big deal but clearly the Asus engineers are familiar with fumbling around under a desk trying to plug something in almost blind.

Feature-wise the SK8V is well equipped, with support for all the standard fare such as IDE devices plus a number of special extras. The SATA ports for example can be used for standard hard disk usage or in a RAID configuration and most importantly, in a RAID0+1 configuration which allows for drives to be hot-swapped (the process of installing or removing a drive while the PC is running).

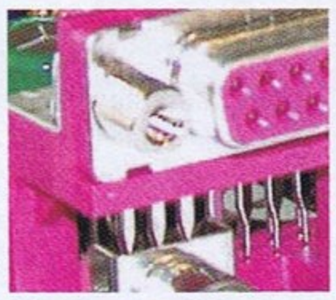
Performance-wise this board has an edge over the SK8V nForce 3 powered board, and in regards to overclocking the AMD 64FX, it's not processor locked at all. This means that you can modify the clock multiplier and tweak the already blazingly fast, multitasking HyperTransport bus, which would be an FSB to the rest of us. Asus are definitely not slacking when it comes to getting the most out of the FX and ultimately it's these overclocking abilities that place the SK8V well in front of the SK8N.

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ A top of the range motherboard for a top of the range processor – ideal for a hardcore overclocker
- ↙ Overclockers with liquid cooling would want the ceiling raised, which could happen in a BIOS update

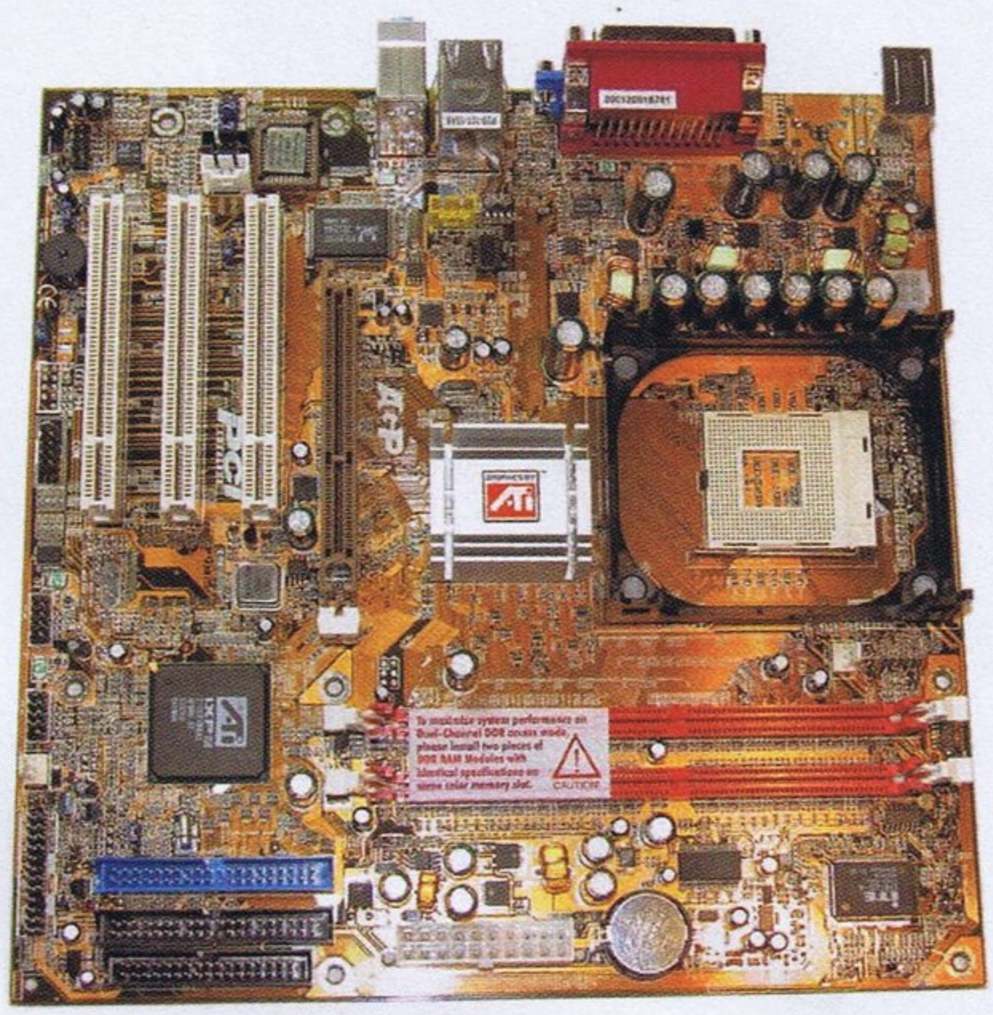
A top of the line board that due to its aggressive overclocking abilities can ultimately be made to run faster than the SK8N's nForce 3 chipset.

93%



→Detail

CPU: 940 pin AMD64 FX and Opteron
Memory: 4 x 184pin DDR DIMM
Max memory: 8GB
Memory types supported: both ECC and non-ECC PC3200/PC2700/PC2100/PC1600 DDR DIMMs
Memory bus: Dual Channel
IDE ports: 2 x ATA 133 for four devices
SATA: 2 x SATA150
RAID: Promise controller, 1x ATA133, 2xSATA150, RAID 0, RAID 1, RAID0+1
Audio: Ad1985 Soundmax 6-channel.
Audio outputs: 3 x2.5mm outputs for multimedia speaker system and SP/DIF
IO: Parallel, Serial, Floppy, 8 x USB2, Infared, IEEE1394, Game/MIDI
LAN: 3COM 3C940 Gigabit LAN controller
Overclocking features: Adjustable Memory, Vcore, AGP and VLink voltage, SFS from 200MHz up to 300MHz in 1 MHz increments
Price: $349
Distributor: Achieva
Web: ww.achieva.com.au
Phone: (02) 9742 3288



SAPPHIRE AXION MAINBOARD

Now they've made Intel more affordable.

One of the great things about Sapphire has been their ability to produce high-end products at an affordable price. In this situation it's the Intel P4 processor that has been made more accessible. Fully P4C compatible, this board features an 800MHz front side bus which is currently the fastest for the 478 pin Intel CPUs.

Scaling it down to keep the price point low, the board features one array of Dual Channel DDR memory which does have the advantage that if you use two identical memory modules they will automatically work in a dual channel configuration. Likewise, the board features only two ATA133 ports to control four IDE devices.

The other significant factor of this mobo, in regard to keeping the cost down is that it features a fully DirectX 8.1 video card in the form of the Radeon 9100 IGP which uses the RV280 core. Running at 275MHz for the core and 550MHz for memory (essentially 275/275) the chipset can render DX8.1 games quite capably.

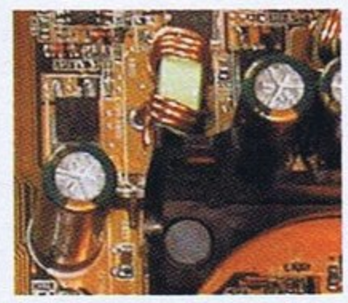
Another extremely impressive feature is the included AC97 sound system with support for six-speaker output. The board ships with a 3 x 3.5mm plug back plate to allow for use with a standard multimedia PC speaker system.

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ A fantastically affordable motherboard with great multimedia options that brings an Intel P4C setup within most budgets
- ↙ You could get so much more out of this board by disabling the on board video and whacking a 9800 Pro/9600 XT or FX5700 in there

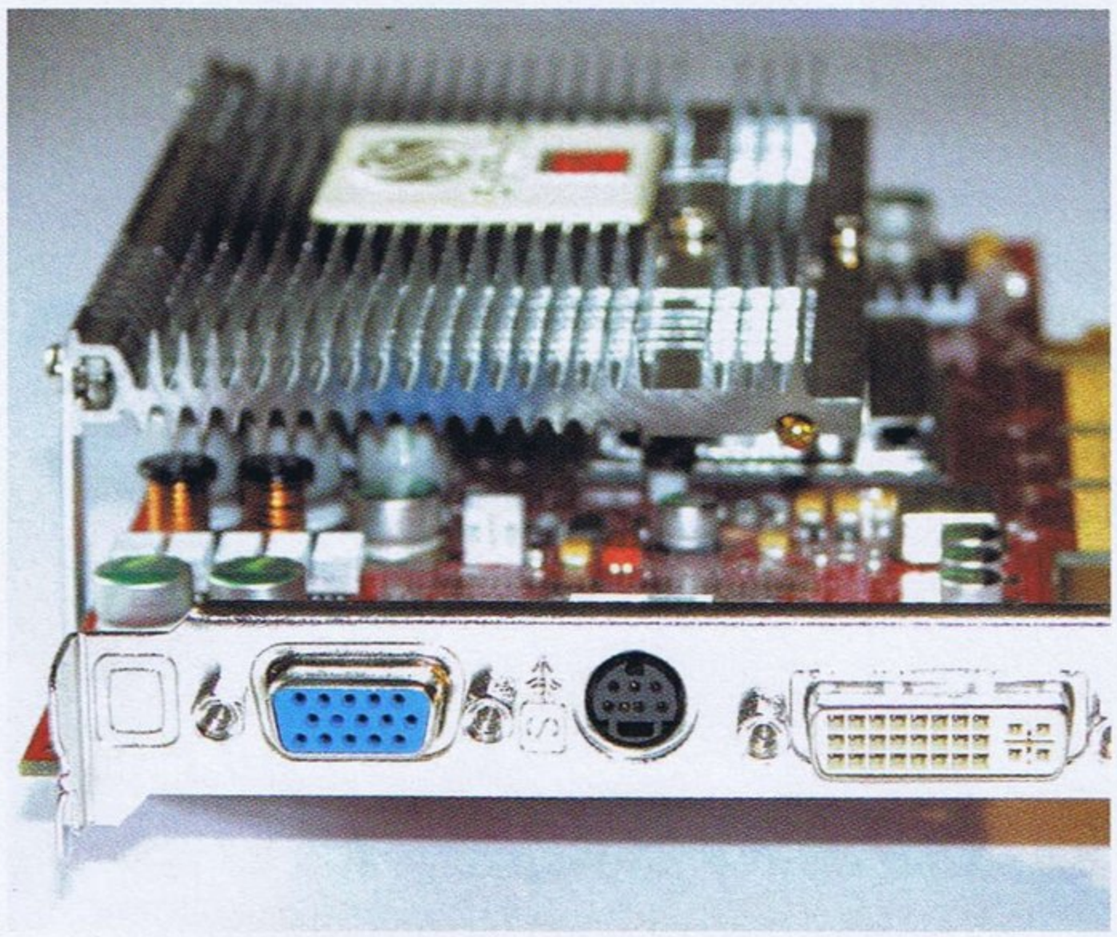
One of the most affordable and well featured Intel P4C solutions available with support for an 800MHz FSB, dual channel DDR and a Radeon 8500 equivalent DirectX 8.1 renderer.

91%



→Detail

CPU: Intel 478 pin Celeron, Northwood or Prescott processor
Memory: 2 x 184pin DDR SDRAM from 64MB to 2GB
Memory bus: Dual Channel
IDE ports: 2 x ATA 133 for four devices
IO: Parallel, Serial, Floppy, 6 x USB, Infrared
Sound: On-board AC97 with 6.1 output
LAN: Realtek Ethernet RTL8100C
On board VGA: ATI Radeon 9100 IGP
Price: $150
Distributor: Achieva
Web: www.achieva.com.au
Phone: (02) 9742 3288



SAPPHIRE RADEON FANLESS 9800 ATLANTIS PRO

Those who like their PCs quiet will be a fan.

There are few more annoying things than sitting calmly in silence only to be bothered by an constant whirring. Buzzing power supplies and an excess of fans inside a PC are all factors that can contribute to a noisy system.

Sapphire, it would seem, have identified the video card as a potential source of ear shattering noise and thus have decided that a 9800 Pro was in desperate need of a makeover. Making the card look like a seriously overloaded beast of burden, the massive heat sink has a presence front and back, and there's no way you're going to fit it into a barebones system. Another downfall of the truly humungous heat sink is that you have to sacrifice at least one and potentially two PCI ports because the heat sinks extend out that far.

In regards to performance, this card is a 9800 Pro which places it on par with an nVIDIA FX5900 Ultra but is still beaten by the 9800 XT and its auto overclocking functions. With 128MB of memory the card is fully capable of rendering everything quickly, but the lack of an additional 128MB will probably be felt in games like *Half-Life 2*. Overclocking-wise a respective gain of 10% was made but in this case individual users' results will vary based on the overall temperature of the room.

The bundled software is average and includes the ubiquitous PowerDVD, driver disk and the best offering being a copy of *Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness*. Though that in itself speaks volumes – Oh Lara, in the OEM bundles already? Ouch!

→Detail

Maximum resolution: 2048 x 1536
Frame Buffer: 128MB DDR
Memory interface: 256-bit
Rendering Pipelines: 8
Pixel Fillrate (Gigapixels per second): 3.04
Core clock: 380 MHz
Memory clock: 700 MHz
Output connections: VGA, TV, DVI
Bundled Software:
Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness, Power DVD
Price: $725
Distributor: Achieva
Web: www.achieva.com.au
Phone: (02) 9742 3288

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ Makes no noise at all. It's completely silent – library quiet. Shhh
- ↙ Has a massive heat sink that obstructs just about everything inside your PC

It's a 9800 Pro but made quieter and more susceptible to hot Australian summers.

72%

MSI MEGA STICK 1

Mega stick it in your pocket and away you go.

MSI have long been renowned for their excellent motherboards but now they're taking on Creative with their MP3/WMA player, the Mega Stick. Extremely light and small, it could even be considered attractive, in an overgrown pencil eraser kind of way.

Powered by one AAA battery, the device has a life of 9-12 hours depending on the format of media played. WMA, for example, uses a tighter compression algorithm than MP3 but therefore uses more power to decode. Basically one AAA battery will allow you to listen to the 128MB capacity of the drive, which can store approximately 8-9 hours of MP3/WMA music.

The most important factor for an MP3 player though is of course sound quality and here the Mega Stick performs admirably. Producing loud, clear, strong tones, bass notes come through with an impressive oomph and treble sounds are bright and clear. Actually, the MSI player sounds better than the Creative MuVo with all its fancy EAX effects.

In terms of functionality the Mega Stick has it all. Not only will it play your music files but it also receives FM radio. Also plug in a microphone and use it as a Dictaphone or alternatively record FM radio to it and transfer it to your PC later along with any ordinary files that can be copied to the device as easily as dragging it from the desktop.

High quality necklace-style earphones add to the package nicely.

→Detail

Dimensions: (WxDxH) 95.7 (W) x 31(D) x 18.9(H) mm
Weight: 29g without battery , 40g with battery
Audio Spec Output: 60mW rms (30mW / channel)
Frequency: 20 to 20KHz
SNR: 90dB
Memory Size: 128 MB
Interface Language: Traditional / Simplified Chinese, English
Headphones: Earphone with neck strap with stereo output of 20mW rms (10mW / Channel)
Battery: AAA-Alkaline Battery
USB Extension Cable Length: 1m
Record formats: 8000 / 11025 / 16000 / 22050 / 32000 / 44100 / 48000 Hz
Price: $199
Distributor: MSI
Web: www.msicomputer.com.au
Phone: (02) 9748 0070

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ A fantastically portable MP3/WMA player with superb sound quality
- ↙ The length of the earphone cords is nowhere near long enough for practical use as you're expected to place the player in a top pocket

They don't call this a 5-in-1 device for nothing. It can receive FM radio, play MP3/WMA files, store data like a floppy disk and record voice or radio. Offers excellent sound quality too which makes this a highly desirable player.

96%

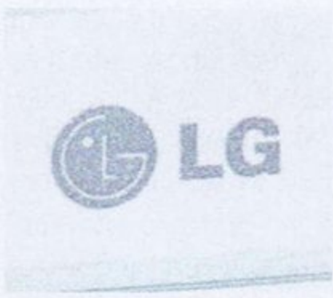
LG SUPER MULTI DVD WRITER GSA-4040B

Why settle for compatibility when you can do it all?

One of the difficulties facing DVD burning and the associated compatibility issues is that there are numerous different standards out there for writing a DVD. Firstly there's the plus and minus designation, which really these days is significant to the cost of the disk. The reason is that all DVD readers can read either the +R or −R designation but until now writers have had to distinguish between +R or −R.

This problem though is no more because LG have decided to release a DVD burner that literally does it all, which would be: DVD RAM, DVD +R, -R, +RW, -RW, −RAM, CD-RW and CD-R. Phew. Compatibility overkill? We think not, because to cite a wise old saying, "you never know when it will come in handy".

It's not just in the realm of compatibility that this drive is an improvement over the 2040B either because it's twice as fast as its predecessor. A constant angular velocity (CAV) drive, our performance tests showed the drive started off at a healthy 5x and consistently progressed to an end speed of 11.12x which really makes installing data from a DVD quite the site. CD read speed was also impressive and successfully reached a close speed of 32x. Data transfers were also good with the drive averaging 16.67 MB/s and peaking at 66.6MB/s in burst mode. Access times were also very healthy with random seeks occurring in 98ms, 1/3 seeks in 126ms and full seeks taking only 165ms. This drive literally does it all and it's fast too. If you haven't yet, now's the time to consider a higher density format optical device.



→Detail

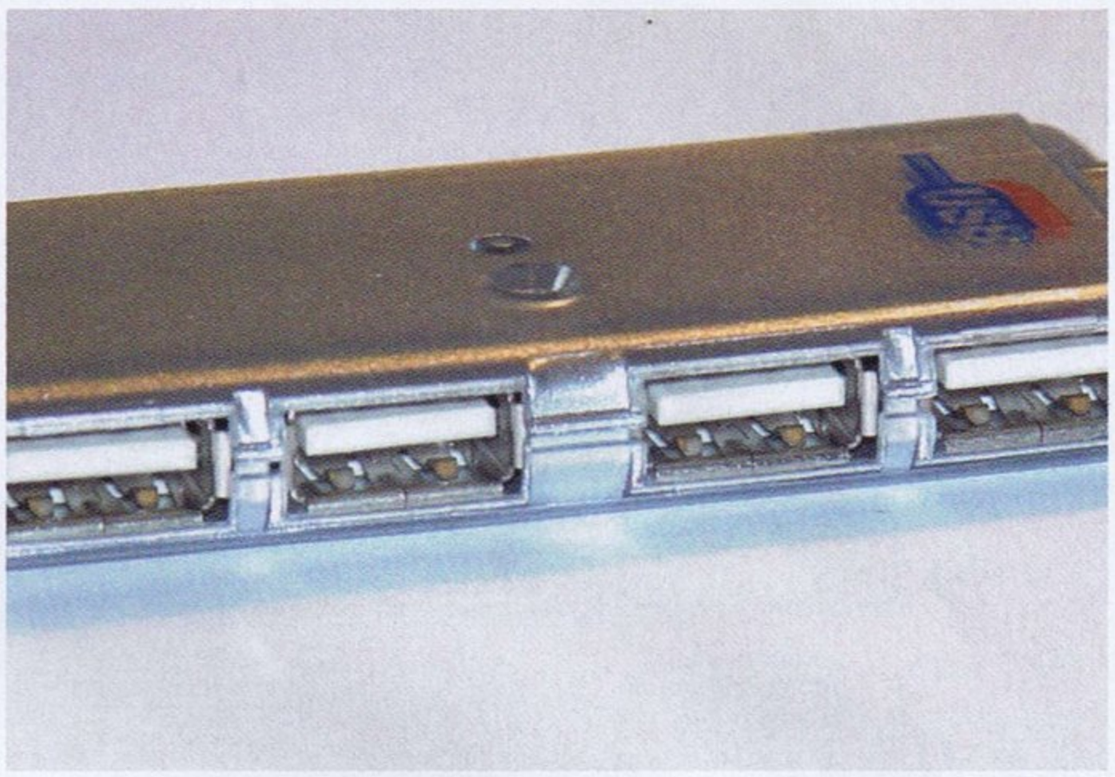
CD Write speeds: CD-R 24x, CD-RW 16x
DVD Write speeds: DVD-RAM 3x, DVD-R 4x, DVD-RW 2x, DVD+R 4x, DVD+RW 10x
Read speed: CD 32x, DVD 12x
Data transfer Rate: CD 4.8MB/s, DVD 16.66MB/s
Buffer Size: 2MB
Bundled software: B's recorder gold, B's Clip, B's DVD, DVD-RAM driver, PowerDVD
Price: $499
Distributor: LG
Web: www.lge.com.au
Phone: 1800 643 156

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ Write in every available format
- ↙ You could whinge about the price but really this drive does it all

With this drive you will never, ever, have to worry about compatibility issues or problems with the required media type being out of stock because quite simply, this drive writes every optical format there is.

94%



USB 2.0 SLIM HUB

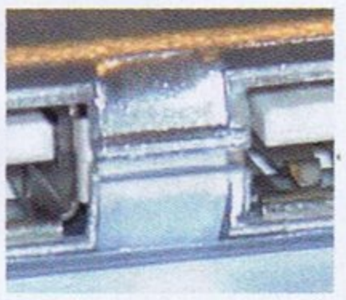
Hubba Hubba, this baby has all the right measurements.

If there are any of you out there that can remember the early days of computing then you should be able to recall just how frustrating it could be to try and get a machine to work with four com ports. It was a nightmare configuring shared interrupts that used an identifier based on a hex address. Thoroughly sloppy and one of the reasons that USB was invented; to be an easy means of connecting and interconnecting numerous devices.

The rest is, as they say, history and now USB is as established a port as parallel was 10 years ago. The popularity, however, has made for a lot of available devices all vying for a port. The solution to this is a USB hub and it has to be said that this imported product is really very good. Let's get the obvious out of the way – it's tiny, really tiny. At just 9cm long x 4cm wide and with a height of only 1cm it's around the size of your index and middle finger together but somewhat slimmer.

It would seem that really this is a hub designed for a laptop – the giveaway being the USB cable for the HUB, which is a whopping 2.5cm in length. This can be alleviated with a male to female USB cable or one of the nifty extension cables with the port mounted in a golf ball. It is important to note however that the hub takes its power from the root USB port (or a Powered Generic HUB) and for this reason may not work on a port with insufficient power output (you will need 500mA per port).

Ultimately though, it's the very small desk presence that makes this so attractive for all users – stick it to the side of your monitor and you'll never know its there.



→Detail

Dimension: 90mm (L) x 40mm (W) x 10mm (H)
USB Compatibility: 1.1 and 2.0
Transfer rates: 1.5/12/480 MBps
Price: $29
Distributor: PC Anyware
Web: www.anyware.com.au
Phone: (03) 9568 0932

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ An extremely tiny and slim USB HUB at a great price
- ↙ No external power supply means that you need a powered USB root HUB for this to work

The most portable USB HUB we've seen. Ideal for laptop owners and equally as useful on desktop PCs

91%

Australia's best gadget magazine

T3

MODERN CLASSICS

20 must-have gadgets with a retro twist

THE BEST FIVE MEGAPIXEL CAMERAS RATED!

WI-FI: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

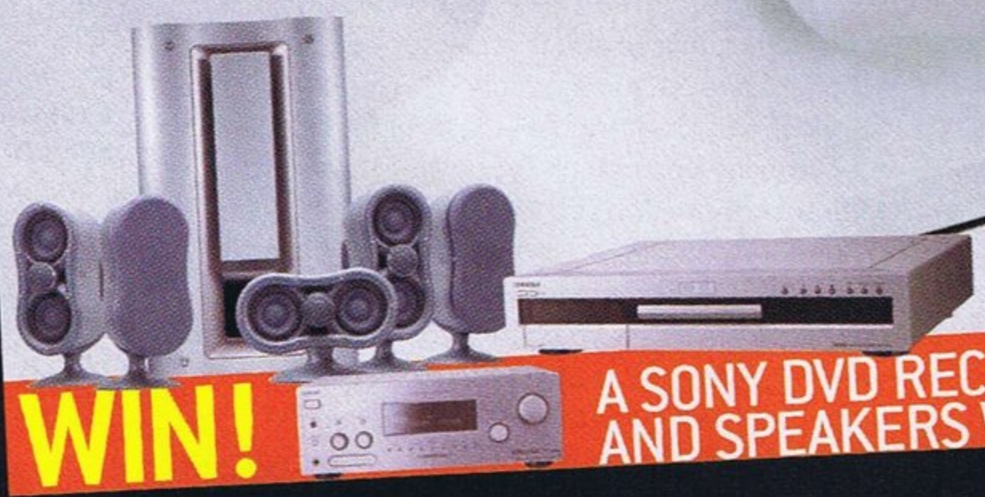
APPLE'S IPOD MINI REVEALED

+34 REVIEWS

APPLE IBOOK G4
SONY DCR-IP1
[illegible]4350

+ THE LATEST KIT TESTED!

SONY'S FIRST DVD CAMCORDER
NOKIA'S NEW SMART PHONE
PANASONIC'S BEST PLASMA YET
AND MANY MORE!



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ON SALE NOW

COOLER MASTER WAVE MASTER

Now you can control the tides with your PC.

Well actually you can't. Control the tides that is, but given the extraordinary naming convention of PC components a jibe was inevitable. Cooler Master have long been producers of quality cooling products and now that they've branched into the realm of PC cases it's comforting to know they've maintained their same high standards.

The entire case is constructed of quality brushed aluminium that varies in density. The side panels are only 1mm thick which isn't completely desirable because it could easily be bent into uselessness – these are panels you can't leave lying around carelessly or they will get damaged. In other areas of the case though the density of the aluminium is much greater – the front cover measures in at a whopping 10mm thick and the plate for the door hinge is 8mm. Being aluminium though it is extremely light.

Aesthetically speaking the brushed alloy case is extremely attractive and is called the "Wave Master" because the front panel is shaped in the form of a sine wave – another benefit of aluminium. The nicest touch though is that the front of the case features two cyan LEDs placed behind the aforementioned 10mm thick plate that makes an impressive and very striking cyan/light blue luminescent glow. Beyond the front panel is another panel on the top of the case that features two USB ports, one Firewire (IEEE1394) port along with headphone out and microphone in jacks.

Working with the case is a pleasure because all the relevant screws that open it are thumbscrews. This allows for easy access to the side panels and the slide out motherboard tray, which is another well thought feature. Completing the job are three pre-installed 80mm Cooler Master fans to keep everything inside at a reasonable temperature. Definitely a quality case.

→Detail

Dimension: L540 x W198 x H458 mm
Weight: 7.8 kg
Material: All Aluminium Alloy
M/B Compatibility: ATX; 12" x 9.6" (30.5cm x 24.5 cm)
Expansion Slots: 7
Ventilation Dual 80mm fans attached to front panel and one 80mm fan attached back panel (Exhaust)
Top Panel: USB 2.0 x 2; MIC x 1; Headphones x 1; IIIE1394 x 1
Price: $249
Distributor: PC Casegear
Web: www.pccasegear.com.au
Phone: (03) 9568 0932

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ A great looking, ultra-light case with a pre-mod in the form of the front LEDs
- ↙ Side panels are flimsy and could be bent into uselessness

One of the better cases out there. Reasonably priced given the materials yet innovative and attractive enough to really turn heads.

92%

USB BLUETOOTH DONGLE

You won't lose your licence from this blue flashing light.

Bluetooth is a completely wireless communications methodology that uses radio frequencies in the 2.402 to 2.4835GHz range to send and receive data and is most commonly found in mobile phones. A well used frequency, 2.4GHz is also used for numerous ISM devices such as cordless phones, baby monitors, garage door openers and other such consumer devices. Bluetooth doesn't interfere because of a feature called spread-spectrum frequency hopping. The Bluetooth device chooses 79 individual, randomly chosen frequencies within its frequency range and then changes between those 79 frequencies 1600 times a second. This ensures that even if two devices clash and interfere with each other it will only be for 1/1600 of a second.

Impressively small in size, the dongle is ideal for a laptop being only 45mm long (60mm including USB plug) x 25mm x 7mm high and when plugged in, communicates its status through the blinking of a rather attractive blue LED. The included software, Widcomms BTW, is absolutely fantastic and is vastly superior to the inbuilt Bluetooth functionality of Windows XP Service Pack 1. Offering a wealth of Bluetooth functionality you can use your PC to share the Internet connection with a PDA – and let's just say that netting on the loo is quite an, erm, blast. Other cool functions include support for Bluetooth headsets so you can communicate with your PC wirelessly and as an audio gateway which allows a remote Bluetooth device to use the server's microphone and speakers as its own, providing it's no further than 10m away.

→Detail

Dimension: 45mm (L) x 25mm (W) x 7mm (H)
USB Compatibility: 1.1
Frequency Rate: 2.4 – 2.4835 GHz FHSS (Frequency Hopping Spread Spectrum)
Modulation Method: GFSK (Gaussian Frequency Shift Keying)
Certification: FCC, CE
DC Power Source: 5V from USB port
Supported Profiles: File Transfer, Dial-up Networking, Fax, Information Exchange, SPP, GAP
Price: $40
Distributor: PC Anyware
Web: www.anyware.com.au
Phone: (02) 9879 5788

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ A miniature Bluetooth device with fantastic connection software
- ↙ Only 10m range, greater distance and ability to penetrate walls is required

If you own any kind of Bluetooth device, particularly a mobile phone, then you want one of these dongles for your PC.

95%

We've got our sights on the biggest games of 2004!

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PlayStation 2 OFFICIAL MAGAZINE-AUSTRALIA **lets you play!**

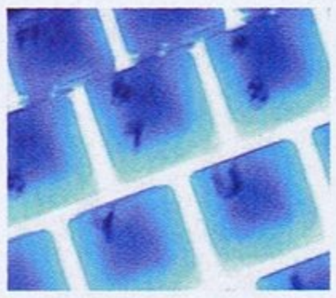
March issue with 10 playable demos on sale now!

ZIPPY EL-715 ILLUMINATED KEYBOARD

The ultimate keyboard for the PC that doubles as a light show.

Here's an item that was particularly popular at E3 2003, it's a keyboard with EL (electro luminescent) lighting under the keys so that in complete darkness, it is completely illuminated. Ultra thin, the keyboard is only 4mm tall which unfortunately has both good and bad points. On the good side, the keyboard is low enough to the desk to facilitate comfortable typing but using a wrist pad will raise your hands too high. Another lack is that there are no rear feet to prop the keyboard up on an angle and when asked to be used by an accomplished touch typist it was discovered that the space bar is impeded by the frame and facilitates mistypes.

But it's unlikely that this keyboard was made with touch typists in mind because the perfect market and use for it is for gaming. Late night gamers will know that overhead lights, or even desk lamps, spoil the ambiance, which is where this keyboard steps in. Lit up by a cool, comfortable blue glow, every key is visible and you can happily game away in darkness with only the glow of monitor, keyboard and mods.



→Detail

Connection: USB
Price: $89
Distributor: PC Case Gear
Web: www.pccasegear.com.au
Phone: (03) 9568 0932

PCGA Verdict

↗ It lights up
↙ Wouldn't type a lengthy document on it

Microsoft, renowned for making the armchair of keyboards (i.e. very comfortable) are still market leaders. But this keyboard has a very useful place in the dark dens of gamers' abodes – get one to game at night with.

81%

MICROSOFT WIRELESS OPTICAL MOUSE

The mouse to match your snakeskin boots.

This mouse is comfortable to hold and the shining scaly pattern makes it reminiscent of a snake. It's also not as tall as other mice, such as the one below, and therefore sits in your hand more comfortably. Tracking is also extremely good but still doesn't reach the performance levels of the MX700, or even of the A4 tech wireless mouse, which means it doesn't quite meet the gaming mark.

There's a lack of back and forward buttons on the side, but that's not such a big deal. The scroll wheel is very smooth and a pleasure to use, plus it features Microsoft's new mousing gimmick – the tilt wheel – which allows for left right navigation of the bottom pane's scroll bar.

→Detail

Batteries required: 2 AA
Price: $99.95
Distributor: Microsoft
Web: www.microsoft.com.au
Phone: 132 058

PCGA Verdict

↗ Finally, fast smooth movement
↙ Could be more comfortable

The manufacturer probably considers the mouse their sports model but the reality is as a gaming device it could only be fairly described as passable. A good mouse for a PC user that would rather mess around on the net then engage in twitch gaming.

70%

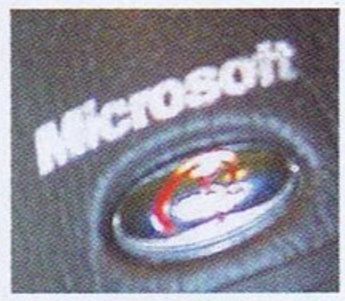
MICROSOFT WIRELESS INTELLIMOUSE EXPLORER

With the look and feel of leather?

That was the claim on the packaging anyway. Let's just say that it takes a healthy imagination to consider it looking and feeling like leather because it's as leathery as your car's dashboard. Worse though is that the mouse, despite what seems to be complex design in regard to ergonomics feels like a brick to use and is annoyingly uncomfortable.

Remaining consistent, the mouse also performs poorly though admittedly Microsoft have sorted out problems their previous wireless mice had in regard to sluggish performance as this mouse moves smoothly. The problem is that it's too slow because it doesn't track precisely enough for faster movents.

The new tilting scroll wheel is nice though.



→Detail

Batteries required: 2 AA
Price: $139.95
Distributor: Microsoft
Web: www.microsoft.com.au
Phone: 132 058

PCGA Verdict

↗ Tilting the scroll wheel allows you to move the scroll bar left and right and tracking is smooth
↙ Uncomfortable ergonomics and slow tracking make this a mouse to avoid

You don't want to even try and game with this mouse. A mouse for Joe computer user who doesn't know any better and thinks it will impress his workmates with lines like "it's great for my spreadsheets".

41%

A4 TECH RECHARGEABLE WIRELESS DESKTOP

Long live radio waves.

Now here's a wireless solution that's really quite good. The first and most striking aspect of it is that the wireless abilities, particularly of the mouse are up there with the abilities of the mighty Logitech MX700. Even better, in all first-person games we tested the mouse was responsive, smooth and a pleasure to use offering excellent, and very fast responses.

The keyboard is also good with the keys a little soft but still offering enough tactile feedback to make typing pleasant. Another interesting feature is that the keys of the keyboard are angled to facilitate easier touch typing.

Connecting the devices up is simple, just a matter of selecting a channel and then pressing the connect button on the receiver. A particularly nice touch as well is that the receiver takes power from the mouse and keyboard ports to act as a battery recharger for the mouse.

The only downside is that the plastic used in the covers for the battery compartments is extremely flimsy, you can expect them to break within weeks of purchase. Although the unit functions fine without said covers excessive movement will cause the batteries to lose connection with their terminals.

→Detail

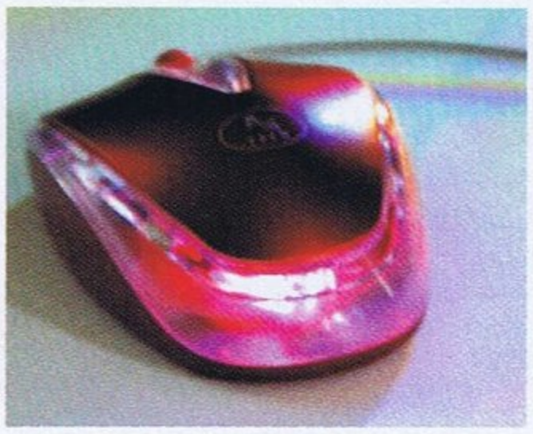
Wireless communications type: Radio
Rechargable: Yes, comes with rechargeable batteries that are powered by the PS2 port
Included: Touch Typing software
Hotkeys: 16 Programmable
Price: $59.95
Distributor: Anyware
Web: www.anyware.com.au
Phone: (02) 9879 5788

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ Excellent wireless communications, the mouse in particular performs better than most wired mice
- ↙ Weak plastic around the battery covers will break after minimal usage

The wireless aspects of this keyboard is extremely good and worth recommending. However, the cheap plastic around the battery covers is bound to cause some heartbreak early on.

77%



RAINBOW SHINING OPTICAL MOUSE

This mouse is red. Does that mean it goes faster?

As well as being coloured a rather attractive red, move this mouse and it lights up with an intense pink/blue glow.

Shaped very similarly to the excellent Logitech MX700, the mouse features the same "V" style button configuration but the slope of the mouse is way too drastic and subsequently makes the device too small for big-handed users.

Performance-wise though the Rainbow performs very well with fast, smooth movement that is indicative of its 800 DPI resolution, but it's nowhere near as responsive as the Logitech MX700 and operates around the same speed as a traditional Microsoft mouse. The scroll wheel, however, is perfect with excellent tactile feedback and smooth movement.

→Detail

Batteries required:
Mouse resolution: 800CPI
Price: $20
Distributor: Anyware
Web: www.anyware.com.au
Phone: (02) 9879 5788

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ The LEDs are very pleasant
- ↙ Mouse resolution could be higher for better responsiveness

An aesthetically pleasant mouse that performs as well as the stock standard MS Mouse.

63%

TURBO OFFICE KEYBOARD WK9100

So how do you turbo charge a keyboard?

This keyboard offers keys which are soft to touch and are responsive with good spacing between them so that you don't find yourself hitting two keys at the same time.

The keyboard does sit too close to the surface of the desk which makes the use of ergonomic devices such as wrist pads impossible. Actually, after prolonged use the back of your hands may hurt as this keyboard isn't conducive to ergonomic use.

It does, however, have some nifty dials. The left dial can be used as a scroll wheel while the right is for volume control. The problem though is that the dials and their housing are made from cheap plastic which feels weak and after prolonged use has the potential to break. It does however have a wealth of extra function buttons that will start Word applications, allow for commonly used menu commands and control media player functions.

→Detail

Number of additional function keys: 30
Price: $25
Distributor: Anyware
Web: www.anyware.com.au
Phone: (02) 9879 5788

PCGA Verdict

- ↗ Has a wealth of function keys
- ↙ Weak plastic and spongy feel to the keys

An average feel to the keyboard and weak plastic construction make this a keyboard which is way behind the standards set by the big players.

48%

MODDIN' ART

Where common sense gives way to the authority of aesthetics

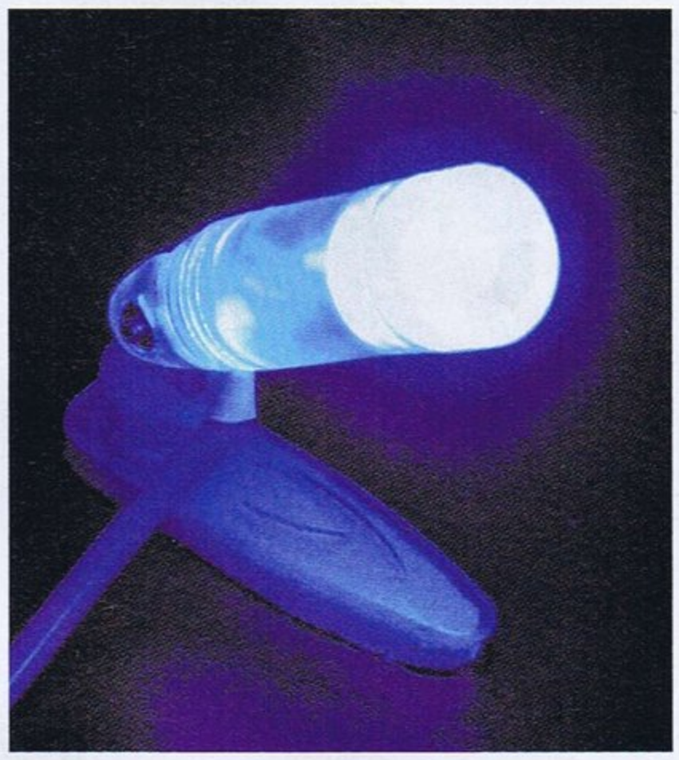
LASER LED SPOTLIGHTS

Price: $19
Distributor: PC Case Gear
Phone: (03) 9568 0932
PCGA Installation Rating: Simple. Just plug it into a 5.25" Molex Connector.
PCGA Verdict: A stylish way to light up a system but looks absolutely stunning when highlighting specific components on a motherboard.

Lights, lights and more lights and a hint of the winds of change. There's no denying the beauty of the glow from a cold cathode tube but increasingly these days LEDs are becoming more popular with modders. Looking at this fine product you can see why. Being a Laser LED, the intensity of the outputted light is extremely bright and the housing is that of a theatre spotlight.

Highly luminescent and striking, the conical spotlight effect gives your PC that Hollywood premiere look and if positioned strategically, can be used for cool effects like putting a spotlight on your CPU, or water cooling kit, or whatever you're just plain proud of. The focal point lens will even magnify the beam or if you don't like it, can be removed completely.

Installation is just plain simple. Plug a 5.25" Molex connector into a spare socket and the LED lights up. One modification we suggest here however is to buy some standard gauge wire and extend the spotlight all the way to the desk, putting them on the bottom of the monitor makes for a great way to light up your keyboard.



PRISMATIC GLASSES

Price: $27.50
Distributor: PC Case Gear
Phone: (03) 9568 0932
PCGA Installation Rating: Simple. Stick them on your head and lie down.
PCGA Verdict: Silly and gimmicky. If you've ever missed out on novelty glasses do yourself a favour and indulge now.

Perhaps best considered a biological mod, these glasses feature prismatic lenses – you know, like on Pink Floyd's famous album cover *Dark Side of the Moon*. But instead of separating different fields and spectrums of light, the glasses manoeuvre it so that you can see directly at 90 degrees.

A distant cousin to those gimmicky X-ray glasses found in comic books, these prismatic lenses actually work with their main purpose allowing you to watch TV, or use a computer while lying on your back. A little disconcerting at first, you lie down comfortably directly in front of the TV and, with the use of these glasses, just by looking at the ceiling you'll be able to watch TV.

Here at PC Games Addict we can think of a lot more uses for these glasses than just watching TV, though admittedly, these mostly involve perving. Oh yeah, I'm just lying on the beach, minding my own business looking at the sky with my strange but funky new glasses. Yup, just looking at the sky, nothing else... Yeah right.

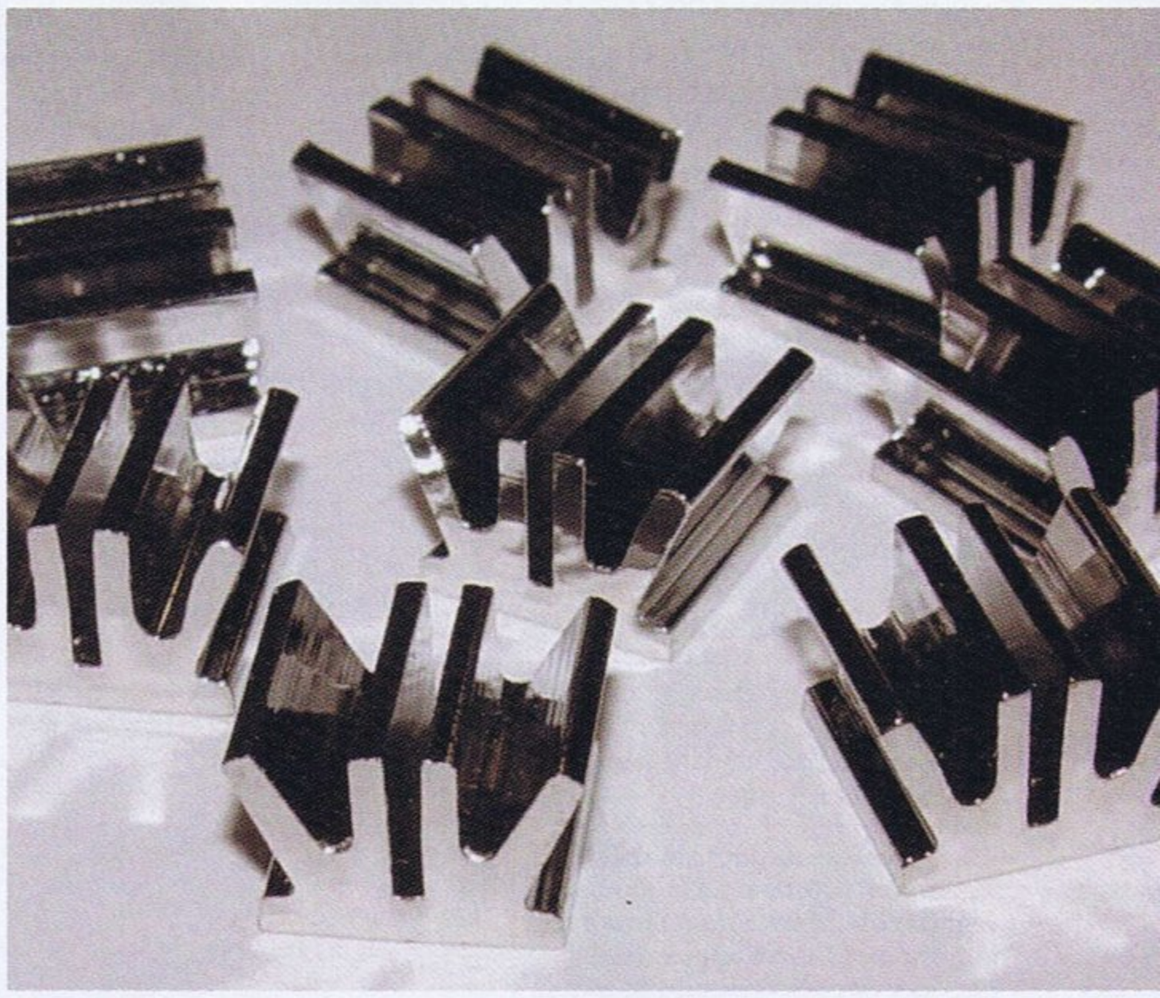
RAMSINKS

Price: $17.80
Distributor: PC Case Gear
Phone: (03) 9568 0932
PCGA Installation Rating: Simple. Stick them onto an exposed memory chip.
PCGA Verdict: A highly affordable way to overclock your video card or memory that looks good too.

Modding walks hand in hand with overclocking because one of the easiest ways to get more power out of a system is by cooling down CPUs and GPUs. These BGA RAMsinks are formed from a solid block of copper, plated in chrome then machined to a mirror-like finish that's flat within .0002 of an inch. To assist with airflow each sink features four fins and a surface area that's 20% larger than previous offerings.

Installation is surprisingly simple because all you need to do is add a drop of thermal adhesive paste to the sink and then stick it on whatever memory you want to cool down. PC Case Gear sell Arctic Silver Thermal Adhesive which would be the recommended bonding agent.

The important consideration is that for around $18 you can effectively cool down your video card enough to scrape some more frames out, though if you put sinks on the memory on both sides you may find it difficult to install a PCI card next to it.



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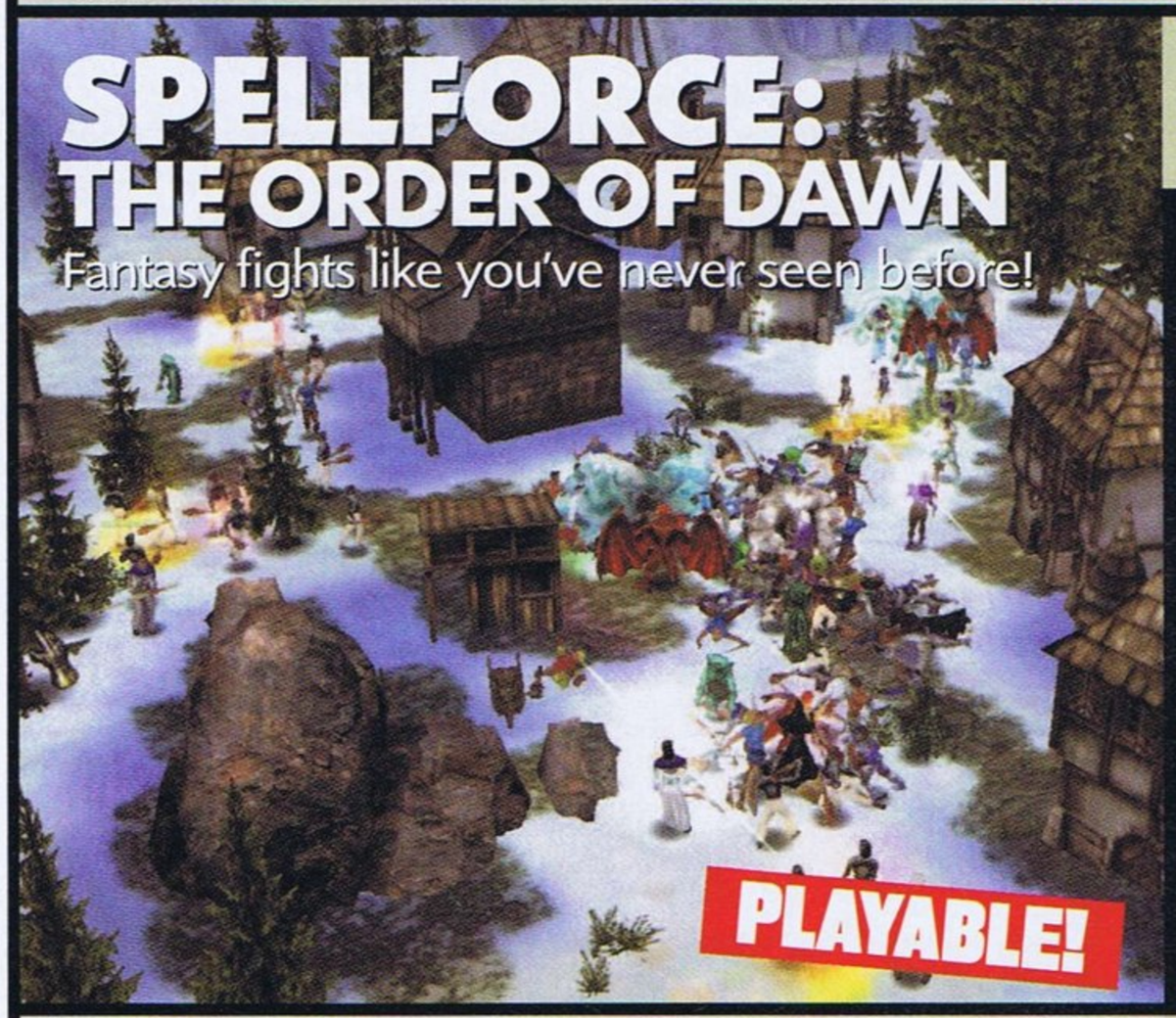

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PLAYABLE DEMOS
Secret Weapons Over Normandy
Spellforce: The Order of Dawn
Terminator 3: War of the Machines

PATCHES
Deus Ex: Invisible War
Tron 2.0 v1x2

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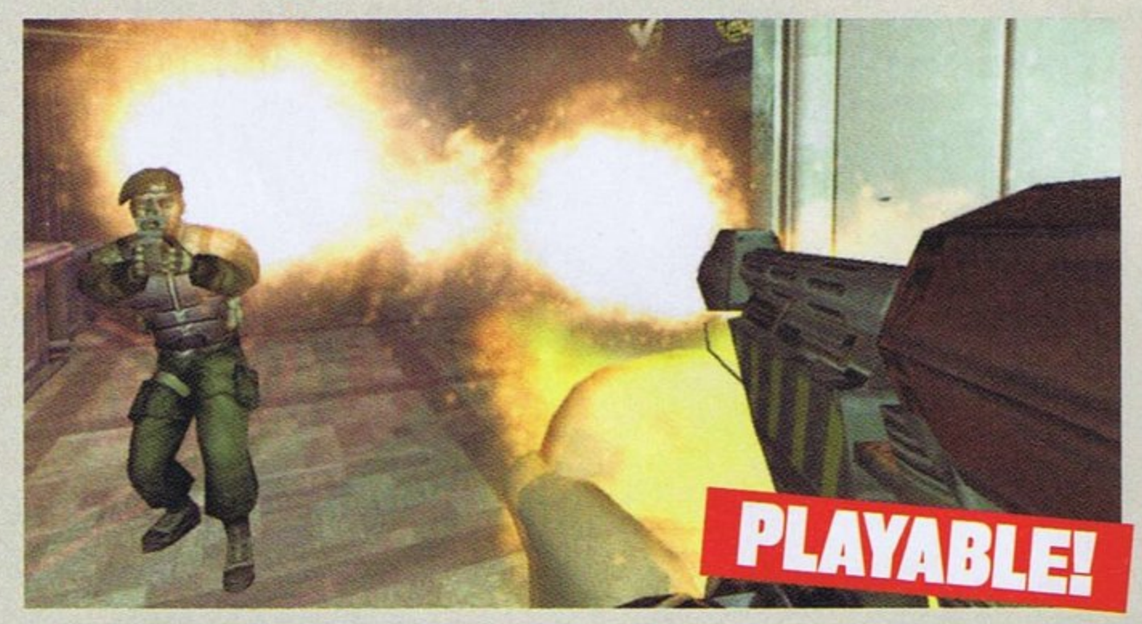

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Sega's bonkers arcade drive-'em-up!

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Terminator 3: War Of The Machines
Breed
Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon
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Firestarter
Joan Of Arc
Massive Assault
Spellforce: The Order Of Dawn
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Doom III

MODS
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Call Of Duty: Heat Of Battle mod
Half-Life: Sven Co-Op v3.0
Jedi Academy Bonus Multiplayer Maps
Battlefield 1942: Experience WWII Map Pack

PATCHES
Age Of Mythology v107
Age Of Mythology: The Titans v101
C&C: Generals v107
Counter-Strike v1005
Deus Ex: Invisible War v1.1
Enemy Territory v102
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Tomb Raider: The Angel Of Darkness v52
Tron 2.0 v1x2
UFO: Aftermath v11a
Vietnam Maps v130
Warlords 4 v101

DEUS EX: INVISIBLE WAR

Developer: ION Storm
Publisher: Eidos Interactive
Size: 223MB
Min. Requirements: 1.2 GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 32MB 3D Accl., Win98/Me/2K/XP

Approximately 20 years after the events depicted in *Deus Ex*, the world is only beginning to recover from a catastrophic worldwide depression. In the Chaotic period of recovery, several religious and political factions see an opportunity to re-shape a worldwide government to suit their agendas, understanding that the right moves now could determine the shape of human society for decades – even centuries – to come. In this techno-nightmare, take part in the dark struggle to raise the world from its own ashes.

The playable demo offers a glimpse into the unique player choice gameplay. Alex D needs transport in a jet held by mercenary Sophia Sak. There are many ways to resolve the challenges in getting your ride – it's up to you how to choose to make it happen. You have a few biomods and a few weapons at your disposal, but are they necessary? Will you use wits or brawn? And do you have enough of either to make it happen?

FIRESTARTER

Developer: GSC Game World
Publisher: Russobit-M
Size: 64.1MB
Min. Requirements: 750MHz CPU, 128MB RAM, GeForce 2MX or better, Win2K/XP

FireStarter is set in year 2010 where the player's conscience is entrapped by an up-to-date virus-infected virtual reality-playing machine called FireStarter. The virus-caused failure resulted in the computer changing the rules of the game – to break out of the trap, the player is to complete the game within 48 hours.

The demo contains one level playable against bots, in Deathmatch and Team Deathmatch modes, with one player character, two monsters and four weapons.

CRAZY TAXI 3: HIGH ROLLER

Developer: Strangelite Studio
Publisher: Empire Interactive/Sega
Size: 100MB
Min. Requirements: 1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, GeForce 3/Radeon 8500 or better 3D Accl., Win98/Me/2K/XP

Trade in those furry dice, sit back and get ready to make some crazy money. From the vertical streets of the West Coast to the frantic mayhem of the Small Apple and the zany nightlife of Glitter Oasis, you'd better get ready to throw the highway code out of the window – 'cos this is driving *Crazy Taxi 3* style.

Bring chaos to the streets day and night, meet all-new crazy passengers and race like mad across the city to their destinations. You gotta get that dude there on time!

Demo Features: The Glitter Oasis area with a three-minute time limit in a choice of four cabs.

PATCHES AND MODS

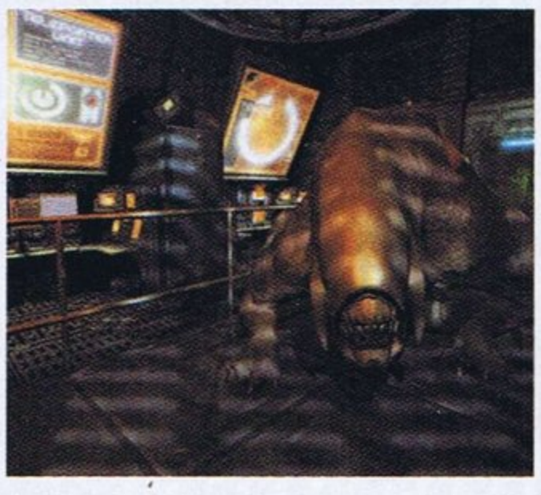
DEUS EX: INVISIBLE WAR v1.1
The first patch for *Invisible War* makes a number of small control changes, speeds up mouse movement, shrinks on-screen text, adds quicksave/quickload keys, increases headshot damage for the pistol, and more.

TRON 2.0 v1X2
This update fixes a selection of problems, such as players being able to use weapons other than the disc in Disc Arena and Disc Tournament games. Please note that save games from previous versions will not work after this update has been applied.

Doom III Preview Movie

Developer: id
Publisher: id
Size: 180MB

This is the awesome presentation of *Doom III* that was shown at the LA Convention Center during the last E3. The movie shows some beautiful and scary in-game footage from this anticipated title.



SPLINTER CELL: PANDORA TOMORROW TRAILER

Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow will offer a deeper cinematic feel, a lot more action and all the favourite elements that made the first game so popular including stealth tactics, espionage, stealing, and assassination using a range of cool high-tech spy gadgetry. Plus multiplayer!

SPELLFORCE: THE ORDER OF DAWN

Developer: Phenomic Game Development
Publisher: JoWooD Productions / Encore
Size: 307MB
Min. Requirements: 1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 32MB 3D Accl, Win98/Me/2K/XP, DirectX 9

Command two races (of six in the full game) and summon up to five heroes simultaneously. Experience the world of *Spellforce* from a bird's eye isometric to 3D person view. Easily manage combat with the innovative Click & Fight technology. Build huge armies and summon massive titans into truly epic warfare.

The demo includes a tutorial, one single-player map, and a two-player multiplayer map.

Secret Weapons Over Normandy

Developer: Totally Games
Publisher: LucasArts
Size: 160MB
Min. Requirements: 850Mhz CPU, 256MB RAM, 32MB 3D Accl., Win98/Me/2K/XP, DirectX 9

Secret Weapons has been designed from the ground up to be a fun and accessible action-oriented combat experience. You will battle the onslaught of the Luftwaffe pilots in the air as well as Axis ground and naval forces from a range of aircraft and turrets.

TERMINATOR 3: WAR OF THE MACHINES

Developer: Clevers Software Development
Publisher: Infogrames Entertainment
Size: 168MB
Min. Requirements: 1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 32MB 3D Accl, Win98/Me/2K/XP, DirectX 9

Terminator 3: War of the Machines will allow up to 32 players to face off online as either technologically advanced SkyNet Terminators or battle-hardened Tech Com Special Forces in an epic multiplayer struggle for supremacy.

Terminator 3: War of the Machines will place players at the very centre of the conflict outlined in the Terminator world – the war with the sentient machines. The battle will rage in single- and multi-player modes across a variety of vast landscapes taken straight from the movie *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*, including downtown Los Angeles, a ruined ocean harbour, devastated highways, Tech Com and SkyNet bases, crumbling factories and more.

EPISODE 132: A NEW HOPE

It is 27 years since the birth of a legend, and the galaxy has been ravaged by countless clones. The Gaming Republic seeks saviours, and among the stars new hope is found in two potential heroes. Star Wars: Battlefront and Star Wars: Republic Commando may yet lead gamers towards the light. Next month, our brave Jedi will seek them out...

PLUS

REVIEWS FAR CRY ARMED & DANGEROUS
TERMINATOR 3: WAR OF THE MACHINES
NEVERWINTER NIGHTS: HORDS OF THE UNDERDARK
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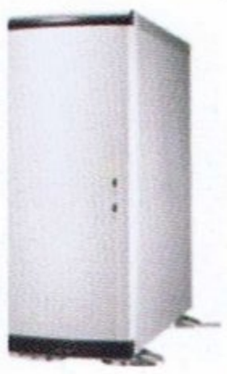

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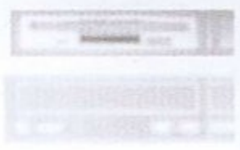

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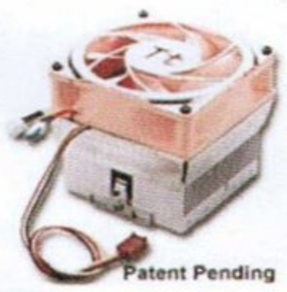

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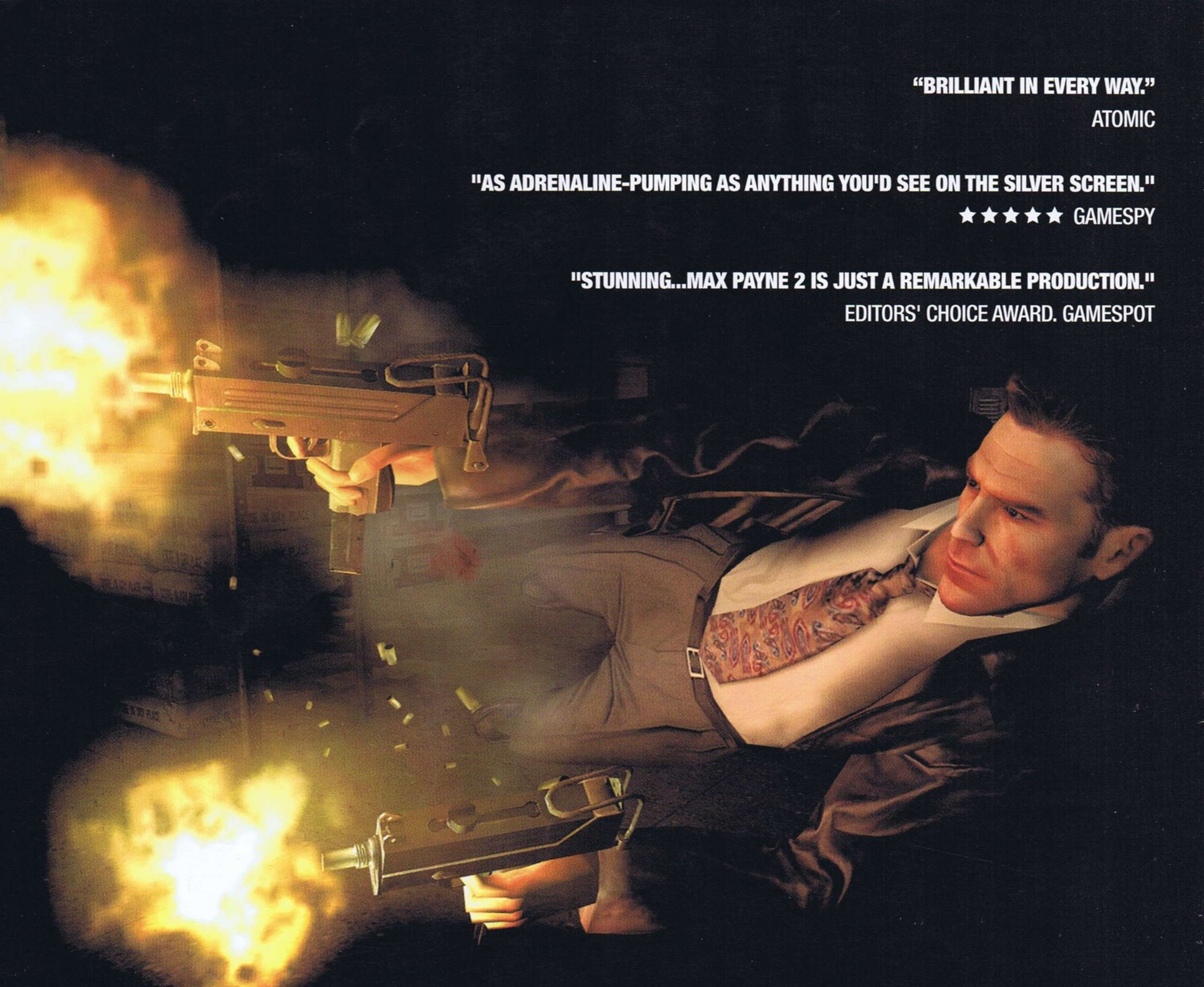

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